

Public School Parents And The Promise Of Public Education

**Findings from a National Survey of Public
School Parents conducted for the AFT**

Hart Research Associates

July 2013

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Introduction

While much has been said and written about our nation's schools, one voice that is heard too rarely in the nation's education debates is that of parents. To help remedy this imbalance, AFT commissioned Hart Research to survey the nation's public school parents and determine their perspectives on the state of public education and the direction it needs to go. Specifically, the survey explores three main questions:

- What do parents want from their public schools?
- Do parents approve of current education policies and trends?
- What is parents' preferred agenda for the future of public education?

This national survey consisted of interviews with 1,003 public school parents (parents with children who attend a regular public school and/or a charter public school), with a margin of error on survey results at ± 3.1 percentage points. The interviews were conducted by telephone, both landline and cell, from July 9-14, 2013.

This report reviews the survey's key findings. This was an in-depth survey (interview length of 20 minutes) that explored a wide range of issues. However, three central themes emerge clearly and consistently from the survey data:

- **Parents value public schools as the most important foundation of strong communities and a strong nation because they help children from all backgrounds reach their potential.**
- **Parents reject many of the education trends and policies being implemented in school systems today, including budget cuts, increased testing, school closings, shifting resources from regular schools to charters, and a narrowed curriculum.**
- **Parents want to see a new approach on education. They overwhelmingly prefer a focus on ensuring strong neighborhood public schools for all children over an agenda of school "choice" through more charters and vouchers.**

I. What Do Parents Want From Public Schools?

- **Parents see public schools as the single most important institution for the future of their community and of their nation.**

Parents say that public schools are by far the most important institution for providing a good future for their communities. Fifty-eight percent (58%) choose public schools, far ahead of religious institutions (14%), businesses (12%), or law enforcement (11%). Similarly, 60% feel that public schools can do more than any other institution to provide a good future for America, over religious institutions (16%), businesses (11%), or the military (11%).

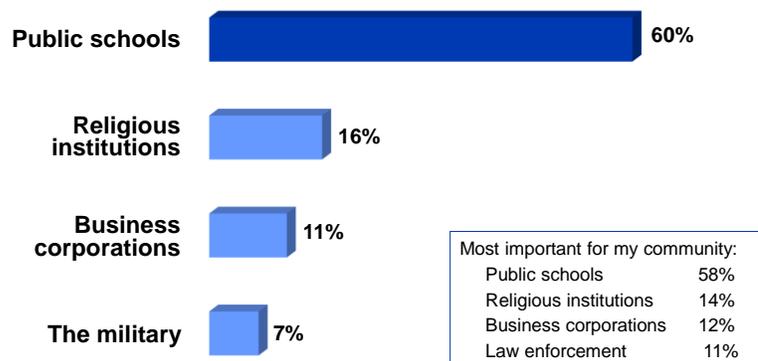
- **Parents say strong public schools are central to our future for two reasons: they help children from all backgrounds to reach their potential, and they are the foundation for strong neighborhoods and communities.**

At a personal level, parents see the tremendous impact schools can have on the lives of their children and other children. No institution can do more to provide opportunity to young people, regardless of where they come from, than public schools. Seventy-eight percent (78%) say that a very important goal for schools is “Ensuring that all children, regardless of background, have the opportunity to succeed.”

But parents also see schools playing a critical societal role, and say that the second most important reason to have good public schools is that they form the bedrock for strong neighborhoods and communities. And 76% say that “educating America’s future workforce to build a strong economy” is a very important goal for schools.

Most Important Institution for America’s Future: Public Schools

Which one of the following institutions do you feel is most important in providing a good future for America and the American people?



- **Parents want schools to do four things to help their children prepare to succeed in college and their careers: 1) improve their knowledge and critical thinking abilities, 2) provide them with a safe learning environment, 3) educate them about their rights and responsibilities as citizens of a democracy, and 4) address their social, emotional, and health needs.**

Parents believe public schools have critically important roles to play in their children’s development, so that they may go on to success in college and/or the workforce. That creates a daunting set of responsibilities for today’s public schools, and yet they are all important. The following are seen as very important goals for public schools:

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- Improving students' knowledge in subject areas like English, history, science, and math (81%).
 - Developing students' critical thinking and reasoning abilities (68%).
 - Providing a safe and secure environment for children (80%).
 - Educating students about the rights and responsibilities of citizens in our democratic society (61%).
 - Addressing students' social, emotional, economic, and health needs (54%).
- **Most parents are satisfied with the job their public schools are doing to help their own children achieve their potential, and rate teacher quality highly.**

Two-thirds (68%) of parents are satisfied with their children's public schools, including 66% of parents in urban schools and 62% of parents with incomes under \$50,000.

Public school teachers get high marks (excellent/good) from 71% of parents, while 20% view teacher quality as adequate and just 7% say not good or poor. Urban parents (69%), lower-income parents (69%), African-American parents (65%), and Latino parents (64%) all give high marks for the quality and performance of their local teachers.

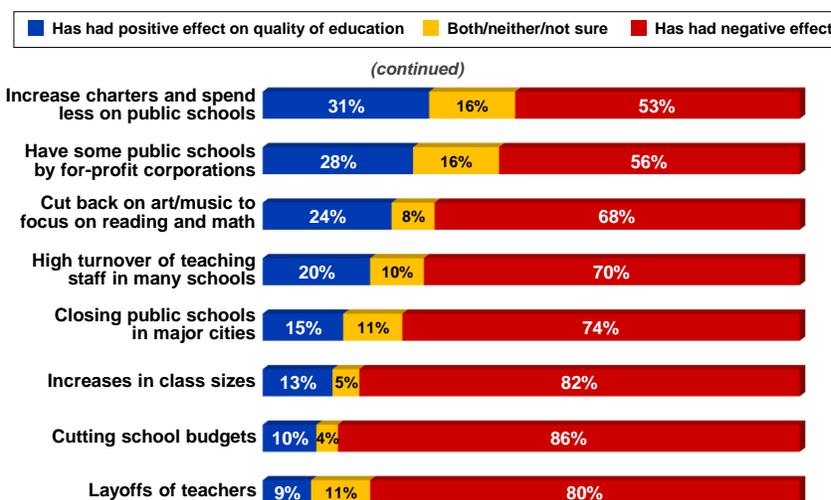
Summary: Parents value public schools as the most important foundation of strong communities and a strong nation, because they help children from all backgrounds to reach their potential.

II. Do Parents Approve Of Current Education Policies?

- **Education policies and practice are changing rapidly across America today. But for the most part, parents do not like what they see.**

The survey asks parents to evaluate 13 current trends and policy developments in education. In all but two cases, parents say the impact has been more negative than positive. More than two-thirds of parents see teacher and staff layoffs, increased class sizes, school closings, high turnover rates, and cutbacks in art, music, libraries, and physical education (to accommodate more time for reading and math) as reducing the quality of public education. Parents also see negative impacts from shifting resources from traditional public schools to charters and having for-profit corporations take over management of public schools.

Few Recent Education Trends Seen As Positive



- **Parents are rebelling against an over-emphasis on standardized testing.**

Perhaps no change in education troubles more parents on a daily basis than the increased emphasis on standardized testing. A 57% majority feels there is too much emphasis on testing today. A remarkable 59% say their own child has felt anxiety or worry about taking a state assessment, and 57% feel that test taking and test preparation are taking time away from teaching and learning in their children’s schools. Indeed, when asked to choose the biggest problems facing public schools today, too much testing—along with lack of funding—is actually one of parents’ top two choices. Far from being the solution for school’s challenges, standardized testing has increasingly become one of the problems.

- **Parents want a good quality public school in their neighborhood, not greater choice of schools to attend.**

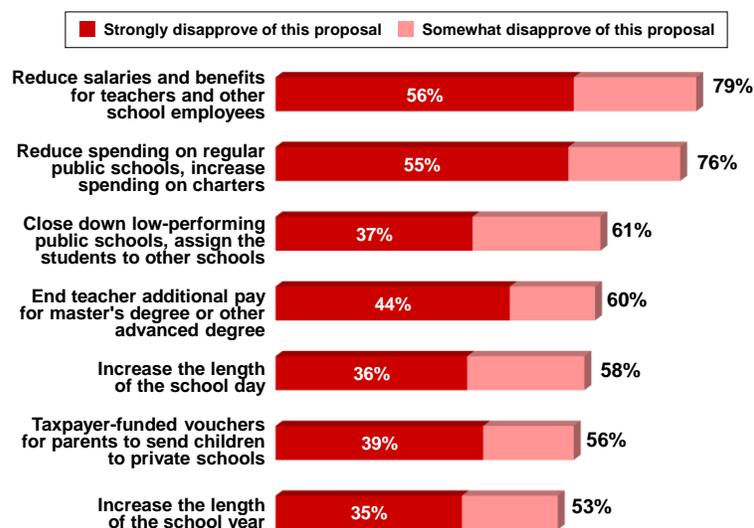
Overwhelmingly, parents tell us that what they want for their children is “a good quality neighborhood public school” (68%), much more than “more choices of which schools I can send my children to” (24%). This preference for good neighborhood schools is true even among groups of parents who are often assumed to be the main audience for the choice approach, such as urban parents (67%) and lower-income parents (66%). Even parents who are less satisfied with the performance of their current public school say by 63% to 29% that what they want is a good neighborhood school.

- **Parents reject most of what constitutes today’s dominant education policy agenda.**

Parents oppose most of the ideas that dominate today’s education discussion, including budget cutting, increased testing, closing down struggling schools, cutting benefits and pay for school employees, shifting resources from regular

schools to charters, providing vouchers to private schools, and a narrowed curriculum. Only 29% agree that schools should find ways to reduce spending because “spending more money does not improve the education our children receive,” while 61% feel instead that cutting education budgets is hurting our schools and that “we should invest in schools, not cut their budgets.”

Parents Reject Current Education Agenda



- **One important exception is states' adoption of common academic standards, which parents see as a step forward for education.**

By a powerful 72% to 20% margin, parents feel that having most states adopt a common set of academic standards that establish what children need to learn has been a positive rather than negative step. Even self-identified Republicans agree (71% to 22%).

- **Parents also see the increase in provision of wrap-around services in schools as a very positive development.**

The single most positive education change parents observe today is the increased provision of health and nutrition services to low-income families through public schools.

- **Summary: Parents reject most of the “reforms” being implemented in many school systems, including budget cuts, increased testing, school closings, shifting resources from regular schools to charters, and a narrowed curriculum.**

III. What Is Parents' Agenda For Public Education?

- **Parents want to see a new direction in education. Instead of a focus on choice through vouchers and charters, they want to see investments made that ensure every child has access to a good public school in their community.**

On the fundamental question underlying today's education debates, parents are of one mind to a remarkable degree: they want to invest in improving neighborhood public schools, not expand parental choice. Given this choice of approaches for improving education, more than three-quarters of parents chose the first approach:

APPROACH A) We should focus on ensuring that every child has access to a good public school in their community. We need to make the investments needed to ensure all schools provide safe conditions, an enriching curriculum, support for students' social and emotional development, and effective teachers. (77% agree)

APPROACH B) We should open more public charter schools and provide more vouchers that allow parents to send their children to private schools at public expense. Children will receive the best education if we give families the financial freedom to attend schools that meet their needs. (20% agree)

Support for the neighborhood schools approach is very widespread, even including groups of parents often portrayed in the media as constituencies for choice: African-American parents (77%), lower-income parents (77%), urban parents (76%), and Republican parents (69%). Even those less than satisfied with their current school agree (73%).

Parents' Priority: Good Public School In Every Community

With which approach for improving education do you agree more?

	Good public schools	More charters/vouchers		Good public schools	More charters/vouchers
Urban	76%	22%	Democrats	82%	16%
Suburban	78%	19%	Independents	79%	18%
Rural	77%	19%	Republicans	69%	27%
Income:			Mothers	82%	16%
Less than \$50K	77%	20%	Fathers	72%	25%
\$50K-\$100K	77%	20%	Children attend:		
More than \$100K	78%	20%	Reg. public schools	79%	18%
Whites	80%	17%	Charter schools	62%	32%
African Americans	77%	21%	Satisfaction w/schools:		
Hispanics	69%	27%	Very/fairly satisfied	79%	18%
Northeast	73%	22%	Just somewhat/not satisfied	73%	24%
South	76%	22%			
Midwest	84%	13%			
West	77%	22%			

- **Parents want to change gears when it comes to teaching quality: rather than removing poorly performing teachers from the classroom, we should treat teachers like professionals, raise hiring standards, and give struggling teachers support and training.**

By 57% to 33%, parents want to see a new approach on teacher quality. Two-thirds (67%) of parents believe most poorly performing teachers can be good

teachers with more support and training, only 23% believe most are incapable of being good teachers.

- **Parents reject the current narrowing of the curriculum, and say it is important to continue offering courses in subjects such as art, music, and physical education.**

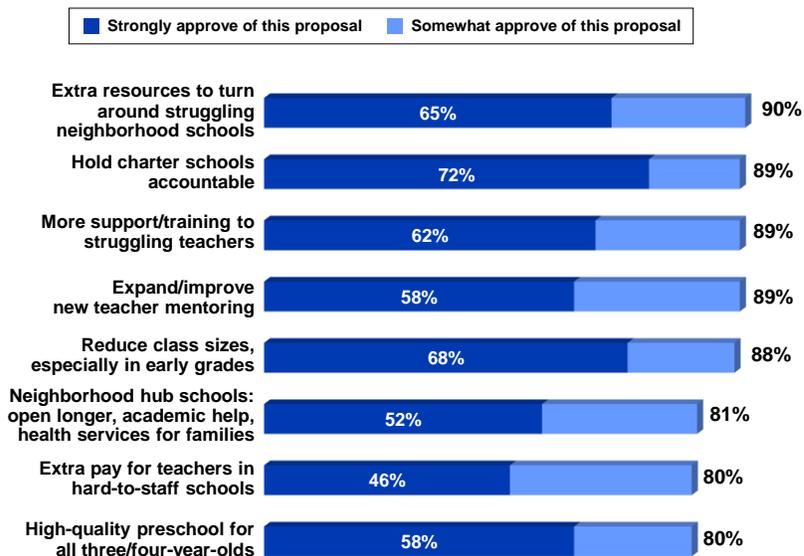
Only 18% agree that schools should focus more on math and reading and spend less time on subjects that are less important for success in college, while 74% favor a more balanced curriculum.

Similarly, parents say by a 19-point margin that “schools should focus on teaching the whole child, including their emotional and social development,” rather than “schools should focus more on teaching basic academics, like math, science, and reading.”

- **Parents favor an investment agenda for improving public schools.**

While parents disapprove of many of the policies now being implemented in public schools systems, they are not averse to change. They simply have a different idea about what steps will do the most to improve public schools. Their focus is on providing additional resources to struggling schools, rather than shutting them down. They want to provide more mentoring for teachers, and extra supports for those who are struggling. They believe charter schools should be held accountable for performance, more neighborhood hub schools should be established, and high-quality preschool should be available to three- and four-year-olds. Parents believe this investment agenda will move us toward their goal of giving every child access to a quality public school.

Parents’ Real Education Agenda



- **Parents trust teachers, principals, and parents—not politicians and business executives—to have the right ideas for their schools.**

Increasingly, key education decisions at the state and local level are being made by elected officials and business leaders. However, low percentages of parents have a great deal or fair amount of confidence in local officials (37%), their governor (39%), or business executives (33%) to have the right education ideas. Instead they express confidence in parent organizations (70%) and educators—both principals (77%) and teachers (81%)—to know what is best for schools.

- By a five-to-one ratio, parents would prefer hiring someone with education experience (74%) rather than business experience (15%) to be their school superintendent.
- By two to one, parents say we need elected officials who can work with teachers unions, because improving education requires the involvement of teachers, rather than officials who will “stand up to teachers unions because they are an obstacle to improving education.”
- **Summary: Parents want to see a new approach on education. They overwhelmingly prefer a focus on ensuring strong neighborhood public schools for all children over an agenda of school choice through more charters and vouchers. And they believe a partnership of parents and educators—not politicians and business executives—can provide the education leadership we need.**