

Roundtable News

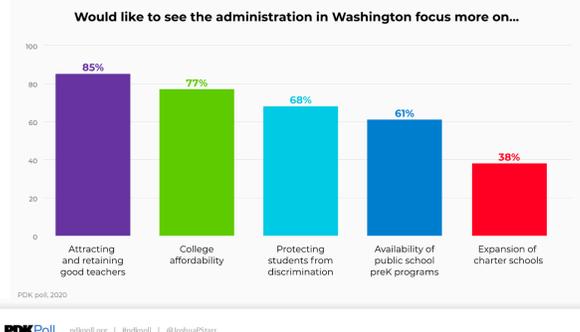
Public Attitudes about Public Education in 2020



As PDK International began planning its 52nd annual poll on Public Perceptions of Public Education in January 2020, little did it know that a pandemic and a crisis around Black Lives Matter would upend norms and routines across the United States. Still, it wanted to probe key issues around policy priorities, choice, diversity, testing, and problems facing schools in an election year, reported CEO Joshua Starr during a January 21 briefing for the Roundtable. It included sobering news for school leaders around public support for choice and testing, among other issues.

The PDK poll is the longest running policy poll of any kind, reported Starr, a former superintendent in Stamford, Connecticut and Montgomery County, Maryland. It contains vitally important longitudinal data as well as keen insights into key policy issues, although not everything can be crammed into the 12-minute window allowed for the poll. Against that backdrop, here are ten takeaways from the 2020 poll released last fall:

1. **Attracting and retaining good teachers is a top issue for the general public.** People really get the importance of good teaching (see graph above). Indeed, said Starr, “people think of teachers as almost all of school!”



2. **A lot of support exists for choice.** The general public tends to like choice. There is a lot of support for expansion of charter schools (almost half of parents), but less support for vouchers. “Rabid anti-choice arguments don’t actually resonate with a lot of Americans,” noted Starr. An especially troubling note was the finding from an earlier survey that only one-third of parents would select public schools as their first choice, a finding that prompted **Laura Kagy** of Seneca East Local Schools in Ohio to exclaim “that would break my heart if true in my district.”
3. **Powerful support for testing exists in the general public.** Fully 83% of adults support the use of tests to determine whether students should have access to special programs. And 77% support using tests around grade promotion and school graduation, with 64% supporting tests as “the main factor” in teacher evaluations. More than 6 in ten (61%) value test results in comparing one school with another. A significant minority (45%) would use tests to determine how much financial support a district receives.
4. **Funding has been the most important issue on the public’s mind for the last 20 years.** Discipline and drug use were seen as

the most significant issues through the late 1990s, but that's changed. Funding has come to the fore. Still concerns about drug use remain. Majorities of adults in the United States consider vaping and e-cigarettes, opioids, and alcohol abuse as either serious concerns or at crisis levels.

5. **The public is split by race and income on questions of diversity.** When asked whether they would support special programs that have the effect of reducing ethnic and racial differences, just 24% of Blacks and 38% of Latinx adults agree, but 53% of Whites and 55% of Whites with incomes over \$100,000 do so. "Reducing ethnic and racial differences" here did not necessarily focus on narrowing the achievement gap. It may be that people of color worry that reducing affirmative action is a threat to themselves and their children while White respondents view affirmative action as reverse discrimination.
6. **Equity audits increase in importance.** Asked by **Michael Lubelfield** of Illinois' North Shore School District #12, about PDK's curriculum audits, Starr responded that equity audits are going through the roof. When you have a curriculum policy, he noted, you can start asking questions about why some students are receiving inferior content. This requires aligning governance and policy with what's happening with teaching and learning in the classroom.
7. **Discussing events of January 6 at the U.S. Capitol can be a classroom challenge.** In a separate rapid response survey of "educators rising" (PDK's effort to engage potential educators in middle and high school), it turned out that 75% of students and 34% of teachers are concerned that teachers will bias the conversation about a mob breaking into the U.S. Capitol with their personal views. While there is overwhelming support for the idea of discussing the events of that troubling day, clear anxiety exists about how to do so. Recent reports indicate some districts have chosen not to show the inauguration of the 46th president of the United States.

8. **PDK did not include a probe of support for local schools this year.** Over the years, PDK has examined the differences between parents views of their children's school, the public's view of their local schools, and the public's views of schools nationally. Consistently the findings confirm that the closer the respondent is to an actually public school, the higher their regard for schools. This probe was not included in the 52nd poll. Said **Jody Goeler** of Connecticut's Hamden Schools, who missed the comparison: "It's sort of like looking forward to Rolling Stones' 'Top 500 Albums of the Decade!'"
9. **Adapting the poll to local communities is valuable** Challenged to apply national findings to smaller rural districts by Deer Island, Maine superintendent **Chris Elkington**, Starr acknowledged the unwillingness of many, to believe that national results applied locally. Take our poll and administer it locally, advised Starr. Raise Your Hand, Texas, a community advocacy group mirrored the 51st PDK poll, essentially producing a Texas PDK poll.
10. **PDK is reconsidering the role of an annual poll** With costs rising, a crowded market of polls, and, indeed, national skepticism about polling accuracy, PDK is considering moving to administering a more in-depth and larger poll every other year.

Discussion

In the discussion that followed three themes stood out: (1) Concern that the comparison of "my child's school" with the public's view of schools generally, was not included in the last poll. The community is reassured with this finding and wants to see it every year. (2) Distress about and thoughtful consideration of the finding that only one-third of families would choose their current public school if given a choice. (3) A suggestion that half-a-dozen focus groups around the country with a skilled interlocutor could shed useful light on what lies behind the support for choice.

The complete 52nd annual poll can be downloaded [at this link](#). A video recording of Starr's presentation is available [here](#) and his slide presentation can be downloaded [here](#).