

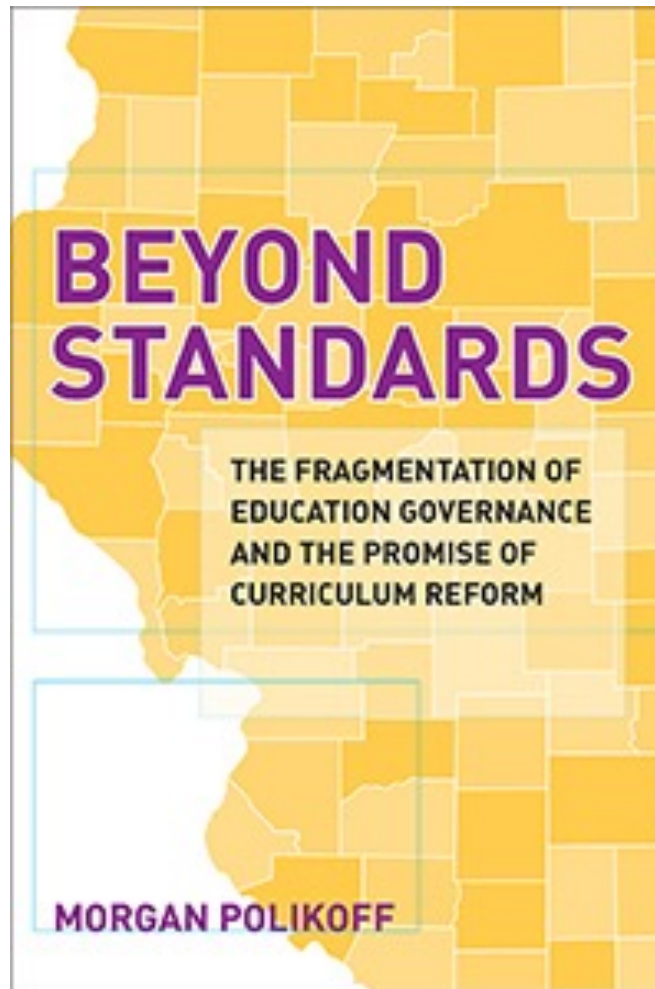
COVID, CRT, and Current Controversies: The State and Federal Education Policy Agenda in a Divided America

Morgan S. Polikoff
University of Southern California

Outline of the talk

- *Beyond Standards*
- Current policy controversies in education
 - "Controversial topics"
 - School choice
 - COVID recovery
- Implications for leaders

Back in 2021, I wrote a book



The argument of *Beyond Standards*

- Standards advocates were right about the importance of teaching and need for systemic reform.
- But standards (broadly) haven't worked:
 - At changing instruction in desired ways
 - At boosting achievement/narrowing gaps
- There are common explanations for the failure of standards, but they fall short.
- My research, and that of others, suggests the problems are more serious and structural than the common explanations would indicate.
- Thus, a more radical change is needed if we are going to improve instruction at scale.

The book is about who controls education

Why, according to *Beyond Standards*, have standards not really worked?

There is very little standardization in curriculum materials (i.e., states don't exert much control)

Table 3. Textbook Market Share for the Top 15 Textbooks by State

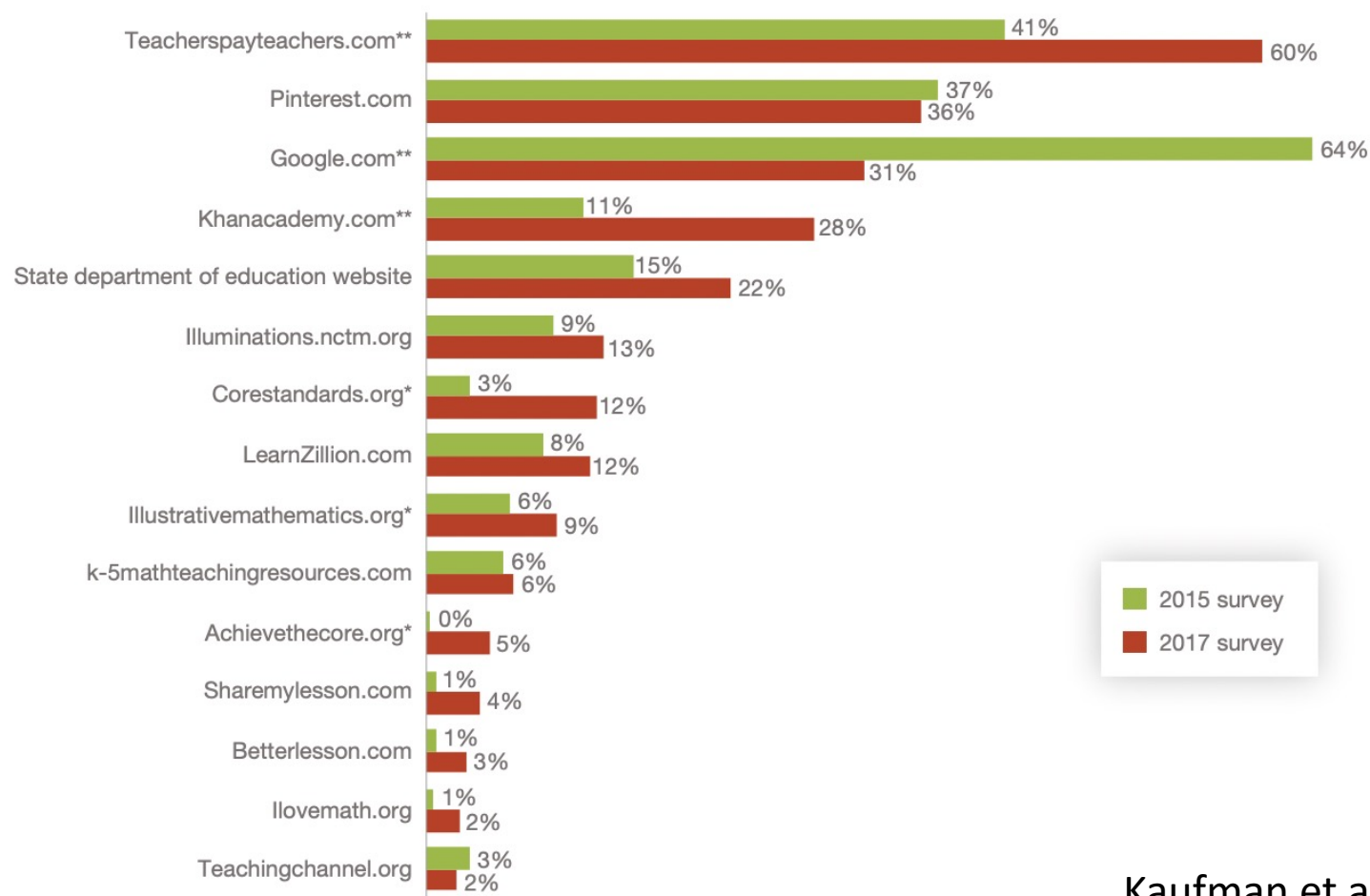
Textbook (Sorted by Share in Pooled Sample)	Pooled 6 States	California	Louisiana	Maryland	New Jersey	New Mexico	Washington
<i>enVision CC (% share)</i>	15.2	11.4	15.5	16.0	29.7	28.3	8.1
<i>Engage NY/Eureka CC</i>	14.4	8.8	58.7	17.9	1.4	0.0	20.5
<i>Go Math CC</i>	12.6	17.2	11.6	1.6	19.9	3.6	0.8
<i>My Math CC</i>	12.2	17.0	8.5	2.2	6.3	29.2	4.5
<i>enVision</i>	7.7	13.7	0.6	5.6	1.2	0.0	1.8
<i>Math Expressions CC</i>	7.3	9.7	0.5	0.0	2.2	0.0	16.9
<i>Everyday Mathematics CC</i>	4.5	3.6	0.0	0.5	16.6	6.2	1.1
<i>Math in Focus CC</i>	2.8	1.3	0.0	0.0	11.6	1.7	3.8
<i>Everyday Mathematics</i>	2.7	3.5	0.0	3.5	3.2	0.3	1.4
<i>Bridges in Mathematics CC</i>	2.2	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	10
<i>Houghton Mifflin Math</i>	2.2	4.4	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0
<i>Stepping Stones CC</i>	1.9	0.3	0.0	1.0	0.0	28.9	2.0
<i>Ready Common Core CC</i>	1.8	0.1	2.3	14.9	0.0	0.0	0.0
<i>Math Connects</i>	1.3	0.0	0.0	2.2	1.2	0.0	6.9
<i>Math Expressions</i>	1.2	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.3	7.8
<i>Other</i>	10.0	7.0	2.3	34.6	6.3	1.5	14.4
School*Year Observations	12,096	8,766	468	334	920	901	468

Note. Estimates are weighted by the inverse of the sampling probability. Only the top 15 texts are listed. Percentages in each column sum to 100% when including the "Other" category.

Teachers have substantial control over what happens in the classroom

FIGURE 3

Mathematics Teachers Using Each Online Material at Least Two to Three Times per Week in 2015 Compared with Use at Least Once per Week in 2017 (N = 366)



With control comes responsibility

TABLE 6

Mathematics Teachers Who Identified Common Core-Aligned Mathematics Topics for the Grade Level(s) They Taught in 2016 and 2017 ($N = 488$)

Grade	2016 Survey	2017 Survey	Change from 2016 to 2017
	Weighted % and Standard Error of Teachers Who Chose Both Aligned Topics and Nothing Else (No Distractor Topics and Not "I Don't Know")	Weighted % and Standard Error of Teachers Who Chose Both Aligned Topics and Nothing Else (No Distractor Topics and Not "I Don't Know")	
Kindergarten	78.1 (10.8)	84.6 (9.7)	+6.5
First	24.1 (13.9)	16.2 (8.3)	-7.9
Second	75.2 (12.5)	79.6 (12.0)	+4.4
Third	0.0 (0.0)	26.2 (14.3)	+26.2°
Fourth	63.1 (14.2)	46.7 (14.3)	-16.4
Fifth	9.5 (6.0)	31.5 (12.6)	+22.0°
Sixth	14.1 (6.7)	19.5 (8.1)	+5.4
Seventh	16.1 (8.0)	19.4 (10.4)	+3.3
Eighth	0.0 (0.0)	0.9 (8.9)	+0.9
Class			
Algebra	1.7 (1.0)	1.6 (1.7)	-0.1
Geometry	11.6 (5.0)	21.0 (9.7)	+9.4

NOTES: The 2017 and 2016 survey item for which these responses were provided was: "Which of the following major topics are emphasized in each indicated grade, according to your state standards for mathematics? Check all that apply for each grade or course." For each grade they taught, teachers were presented with a set of topics, two of which were aligned with the Common Core and two that were not. Superscript symbol indicates significant difference between the same teachers' responses in 2016 and 2017, ° $p < 0.10$. The subsample for each grade includes teachers who taught at that grade level—and thus responded for topics at that grade-level—in both 2016 and 2017.

How do we rebalance curriculum control?

- Make teaching doable with quality core curriculum materials.
- Districts must expect and support coherent implementation.
 - Engage teachers in adoptions to ensure buy-in, but don't reinvent the wheel.
 - Not scripted, but not laissez-faire.
- Structures to minimize supplementation and make it collaborative and coherent.
 - Identify areas of weakness of core materials and build supplementation in.

The imperative for state leadership

- Bearing in mind political realities and existing systems and structures, states should:
 - (minimum) put out guidance for what materials meet standards.
 - (better) require public school districts to adopt from among a small list of materials
 - Identify weaknesses of adopted materials and support efforts to shore them up
 - Provide or identify providers for professional learning.
 - Collect good data on what's being implemented where.
 - Consider state-created curricula where existing materials fall short.
 - Try to understand and support actual implementation

When everyone's in charge, is anyone?

- COVID and the failure of every-district-leader-for-herself
- Many examples of local control thwarting equity and improvement
 - Segregating school district boundaries
 - Undemocratic school boards
 - Local funding of schools
 - Distribution of high-quality teachers
- Address these issues rather than accepting them as they are.

Would I make the same recommendations if I were writing the book today?

There's a lot going on right now in education policy

- Enrollment declines/the growth of school choice
- COVID recovery
 - Achievement
 - SEL/mental health
- Student discipline/behavior issues
- Gun violence in schools
- “Parents’ rights”
- Curriculum issues
 - Race
 - LGBT

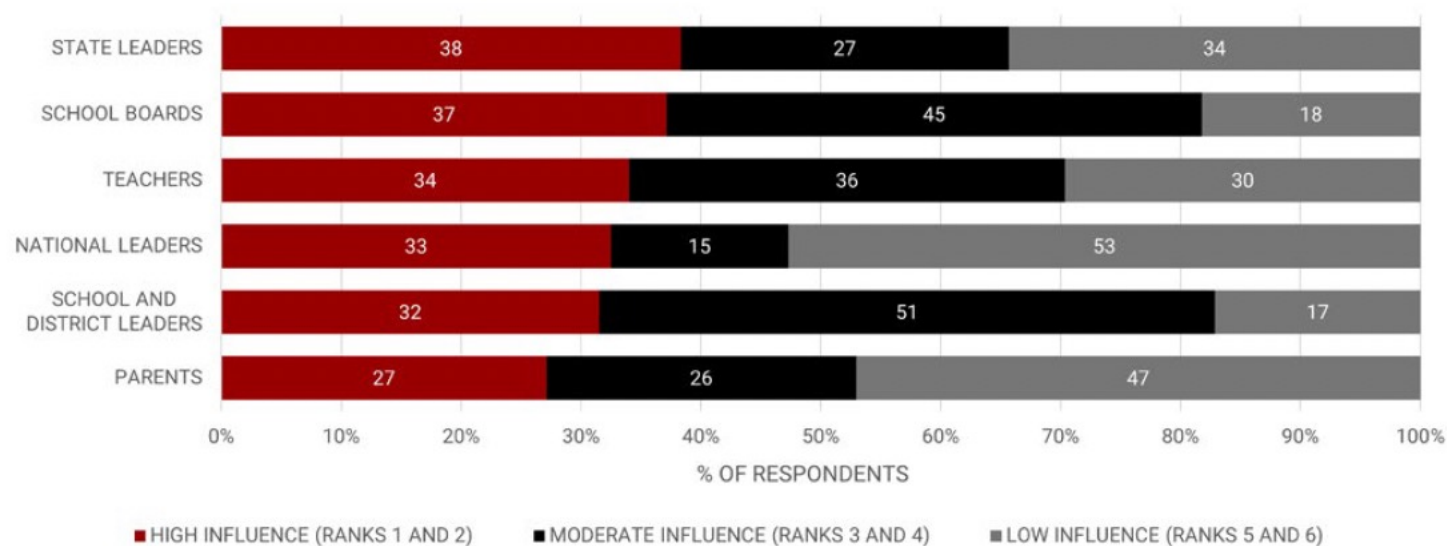
There's a lot going on right now in education policy

- **Enrollment declines/the growth of school choice**
- **COVID recovery**
 - Achievement
 - SEL/mental health
- Student discipline/behavior issues
- Gun violence in schools
- **“Parents’ rights”**
- **Curriculum issues**
 - Race
 - LGBT

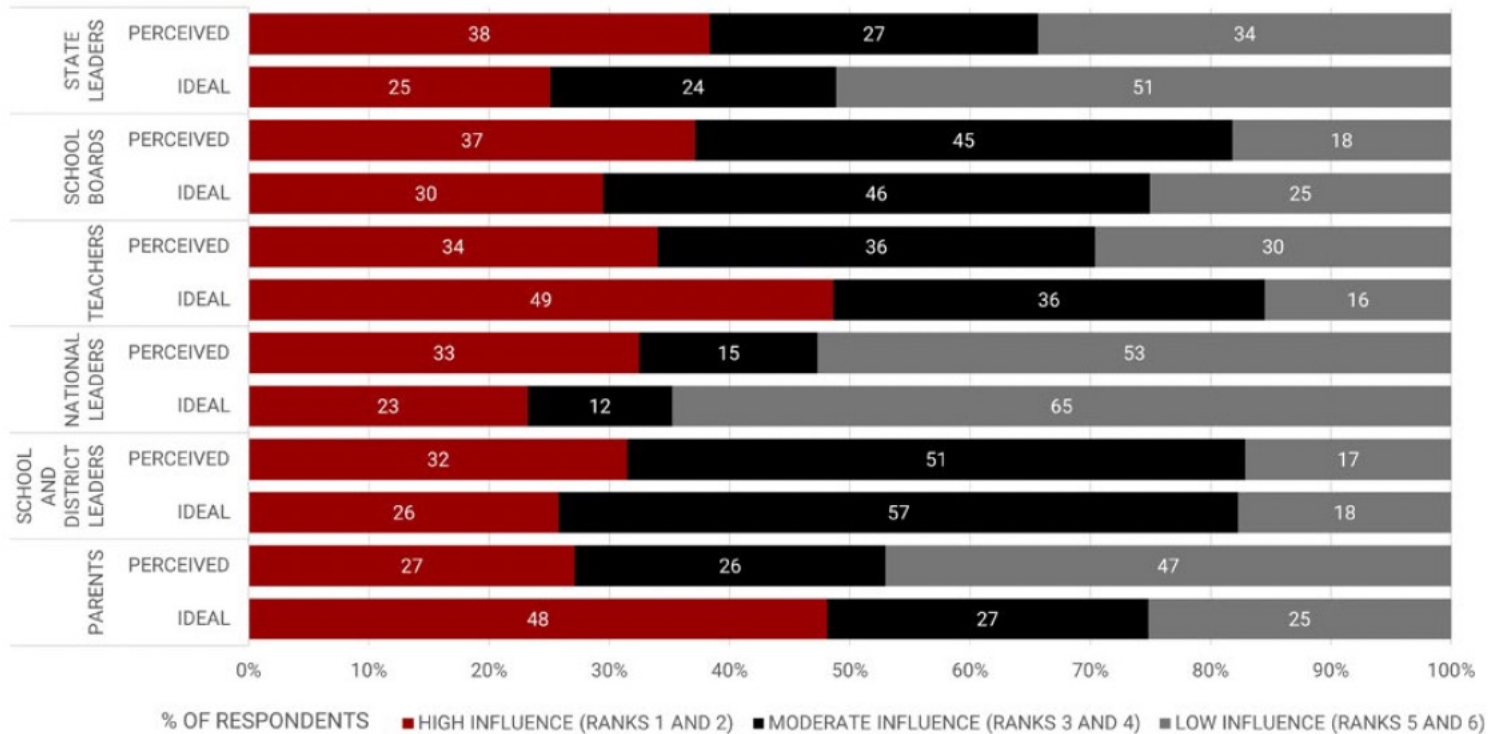
Who controls education? Who should control it?

- We asked a representative sample of Americans:
 - How much influence do each of the following groups currently have over what is taught in schools (1 = most influence, ... 6 = least influence)
 - Parents
 - Local school boards
 - Teachers
 - School and district leaders
 - State education leaders
 - National education leaders
 - How much influence *should* each of the following groups currently have over what is taught in schools (1 = most influence, ... 6 = least influence)

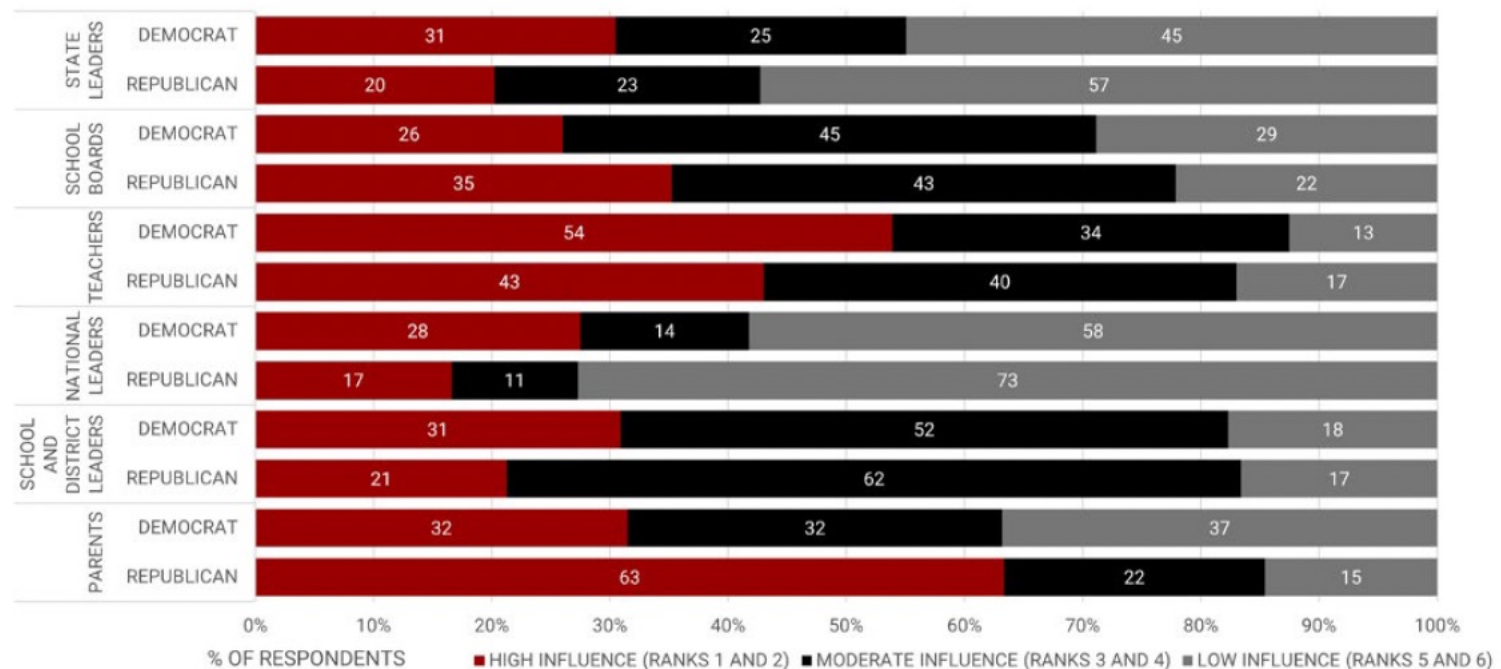
Adults perceive state leaders and local school boards to have the most control



But they think state and national leaders have too much control; parents and teachers not enough



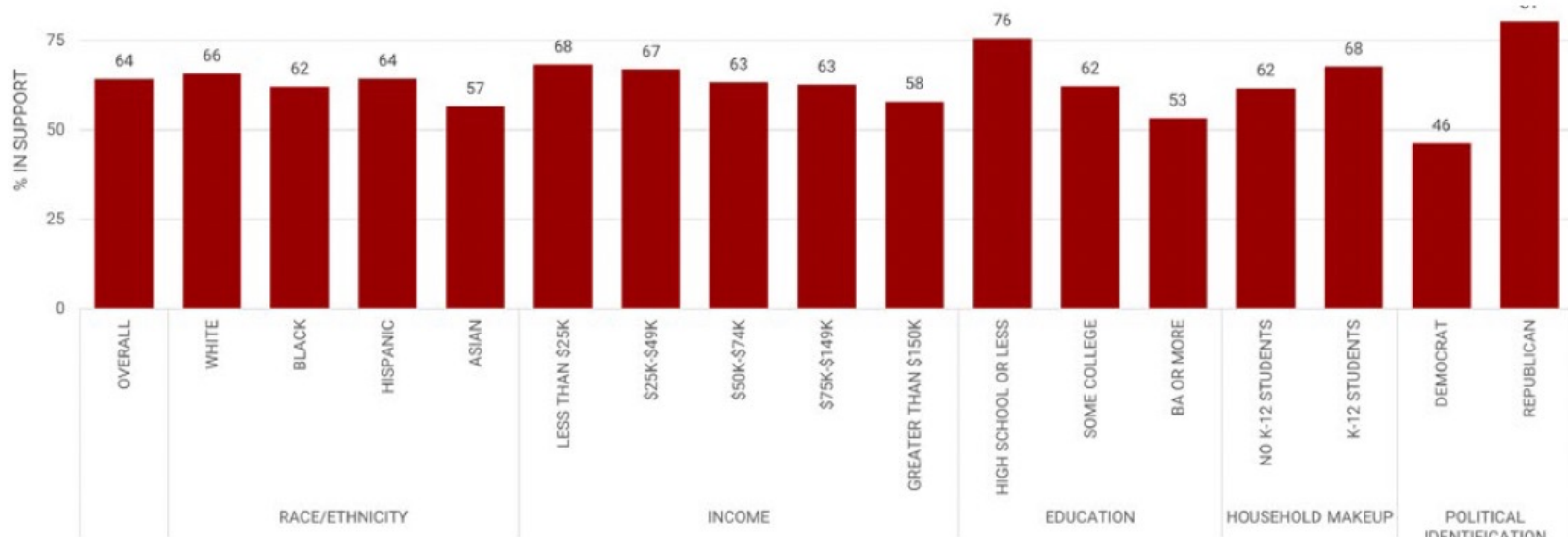
Support for parent control driven more by Republicans, support for teachers by Democrats



Should parents be able to opt out?

- We also asked a representative sample of Americans:
 - To what extent do you agree that parents should be able to opt-out their children from lessons that include content they disagree with?

There is very strong support for the right of parents to opt out



IDEAS • EDUCATION

Most Americans Think Parents Should Be Able to Opt Their Kids Out of Learning Things They Disagree With. That's Terrifying

Republicans clearly believe the parents' rights messaging is working

LOCAL OPINIONS

Opinion | Virginia's new school guidance protects parental rights

By Mary Vought

September 22, 2022 at 2:30 p.m. EDT

EDUCATION

Revised AP African American Studies class drops controversial topics after criticism

Updated February 1, 2023 · 2:43 PM ET

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

The New York Times

Education Issues Vault to Top of the G.O.P.'s Presidential Race

Donald Trump and possible rivals, like Gov. Ron DeSantis, are making appeals to conservative voters on race and gender issues, but such messages had a mixed record in November's midterm elections.

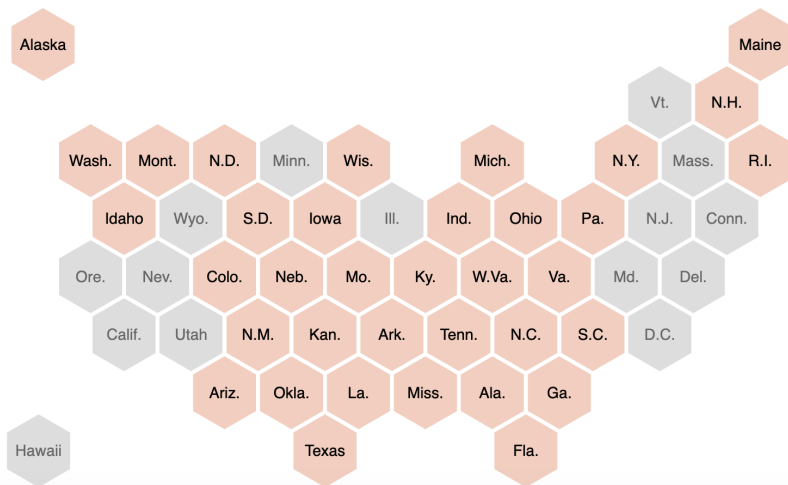
GOP-led states are pursuing an agenda to strip race and LGBT-related content from curricula

- 18 states are now implementing legislation to restrict the teaching of critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism or sexism in the classroom.
 - In some states where laws haven't yet passed, there have been executive actions.
- There are also federal actions (e.g., Parents' Bill of Rights Act) that will pass the House but not the Senate.

And Democratic-led states are doing the opposite

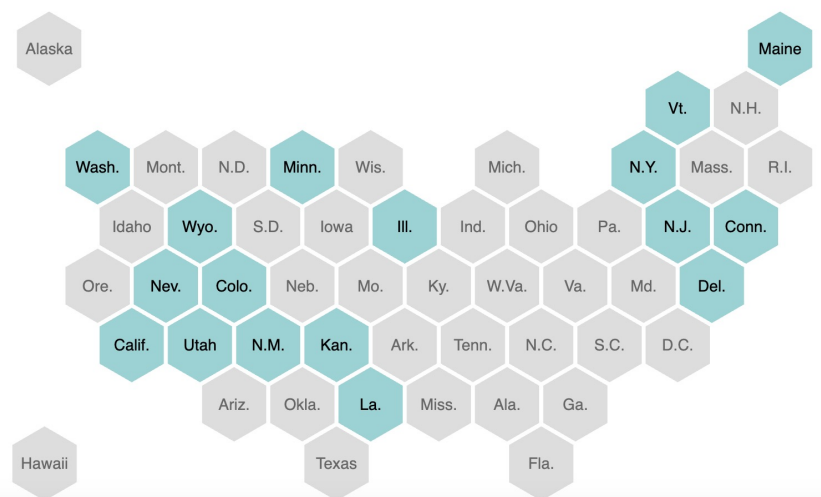
We have tracked efforts in 36 states to **restrict** education on racism, bias, the contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to U.S. history, or related topics

Click or tap on a state to see details.



We have tracked efforts in 17 states to **expand** education on racism, bias, the contributions of specific racial or ethnic groups to U.S. history, or related topics.

Click or tap on a state to see details.



There are many “flavors” of ‘controversial topics’

- See for instance proposed legislation in Missouri, which would ban teaching of the following:
 - That “the US is fundamentally racist or sexist”
 - “The 1619 Project or any successor theory or concept”
 - “Critical race theory or any successor theory or concept”
 - “Creating projects or assignments that compel students to ... engage in political activism on behalf of a specific policy or social issue”
 - “Forcing teachers to discuss a **current controversial topic of public policy or any particular social issues**. If a teacher does choose to teach such topics, the teaching shall be done with an aim to teach the issue from **both sides**.”
 - “Enforcing policies at schools that prevent students from engaging in and discussing ... traditional American history such as founding documents and the founding fathers.”

And surveillance of curriculum will continue to increase

- Again from Missouri, each school and charter school website will have to include:
 - All instructional or training materials for staff/faculty training
 - All learning materials and activities used for student instruction (including title, author, link, information on how to review)
 - Inventory of the resources available to students in the library

Things spiral to the ridiculous very quickly

REPORT

The challenges of curriculum materials as a reform lever

Morgan Polikoff · Thursday, June 28, 2018

Pasco to replace K-5 classroom libraries, a nod to Florida's new book rules

Some teachers are not happy about the move, which gives them less flexibility in choosing books for their students.

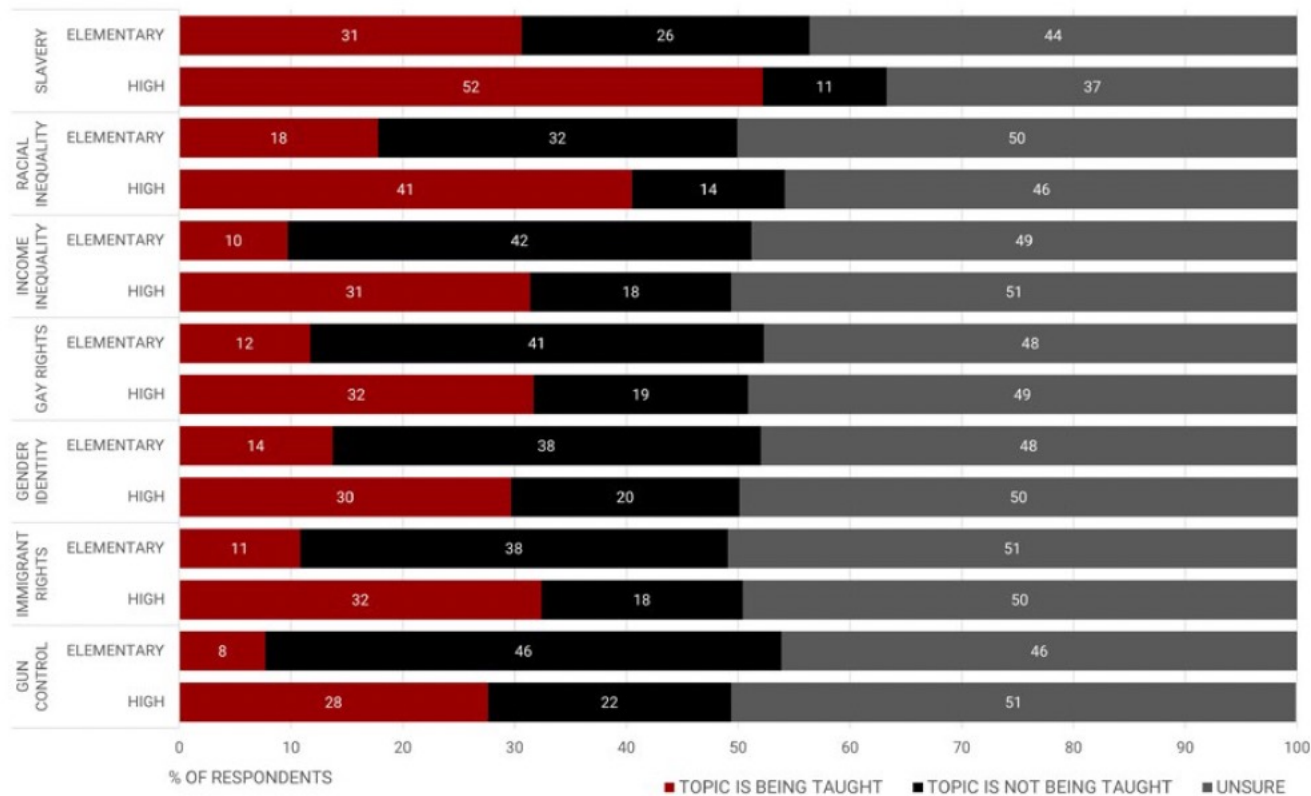


PROTECTING
INNOCENCE



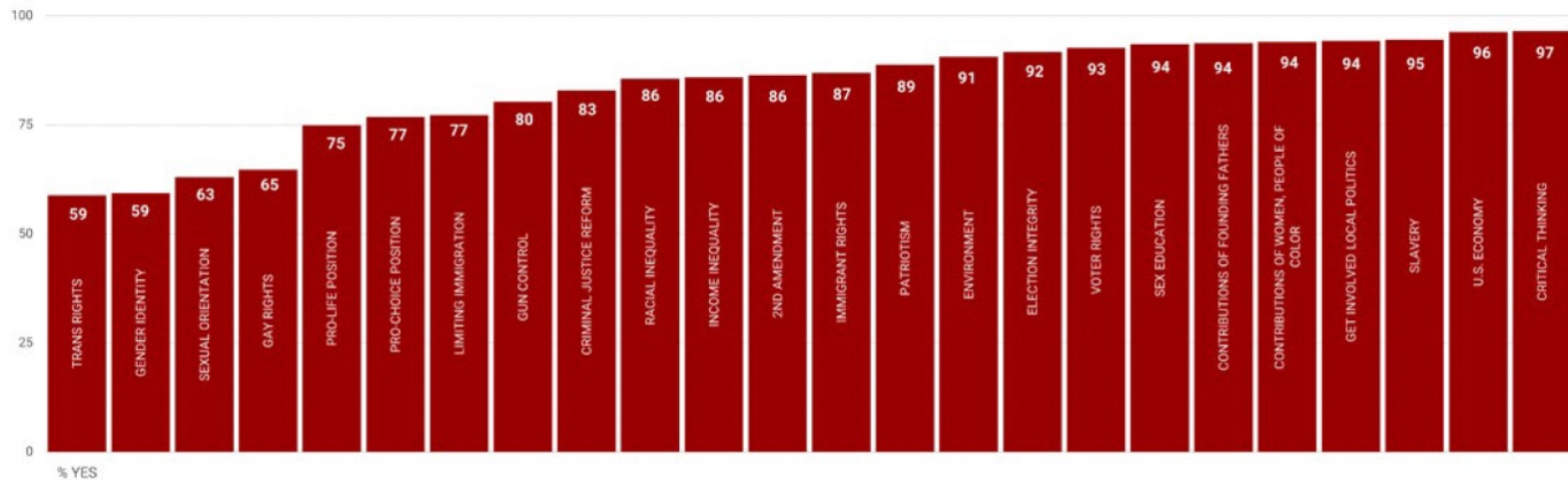
What do Americans really think should be taught in schools?

On one hand, Americans don't really think these topics are being taught (especially in elementary)



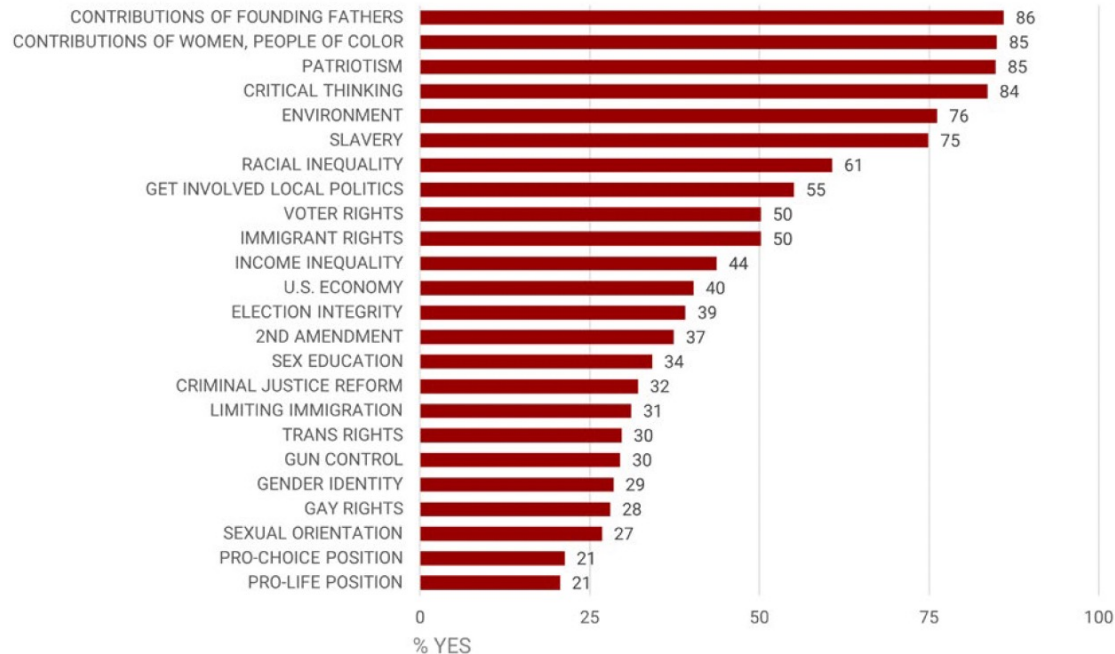
Americans support teaching controversial topics in high school

Figure 7: Adults overwhelmingly believe students should be learning about controversial topics in high school.



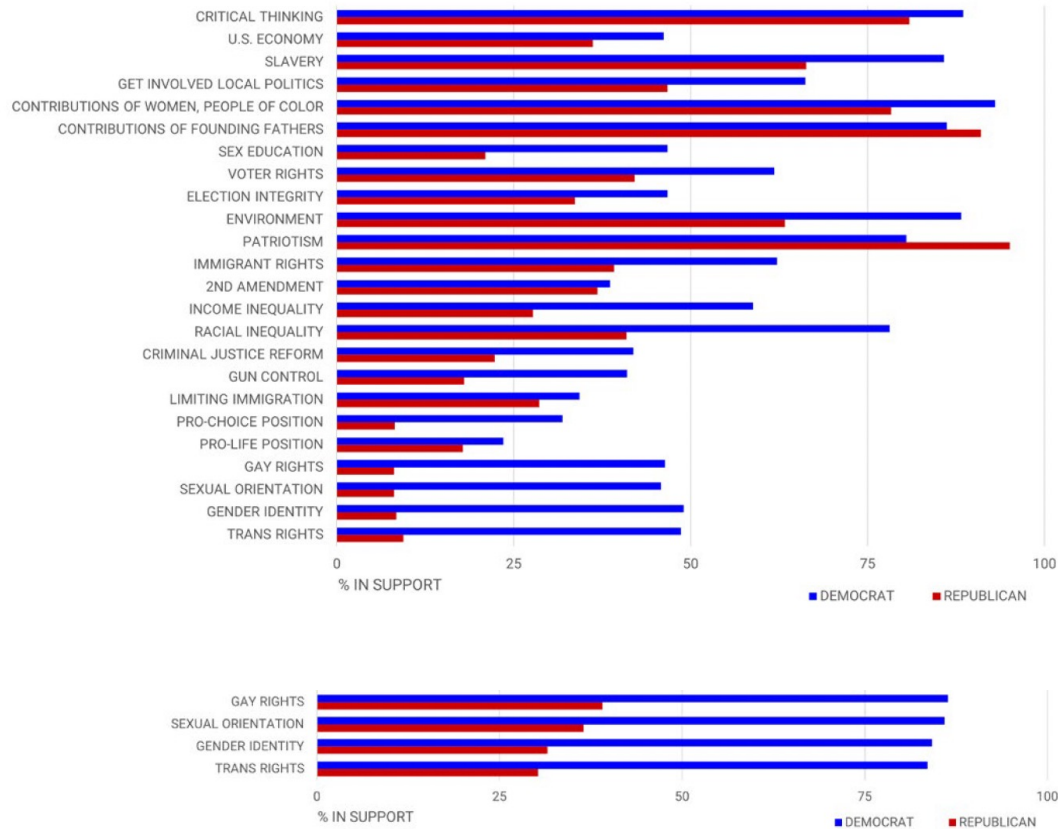
... But are much more ambivalent about elementary school children learning them

Figure 10: Adults support elementary students learning about some complex topics, oppose others



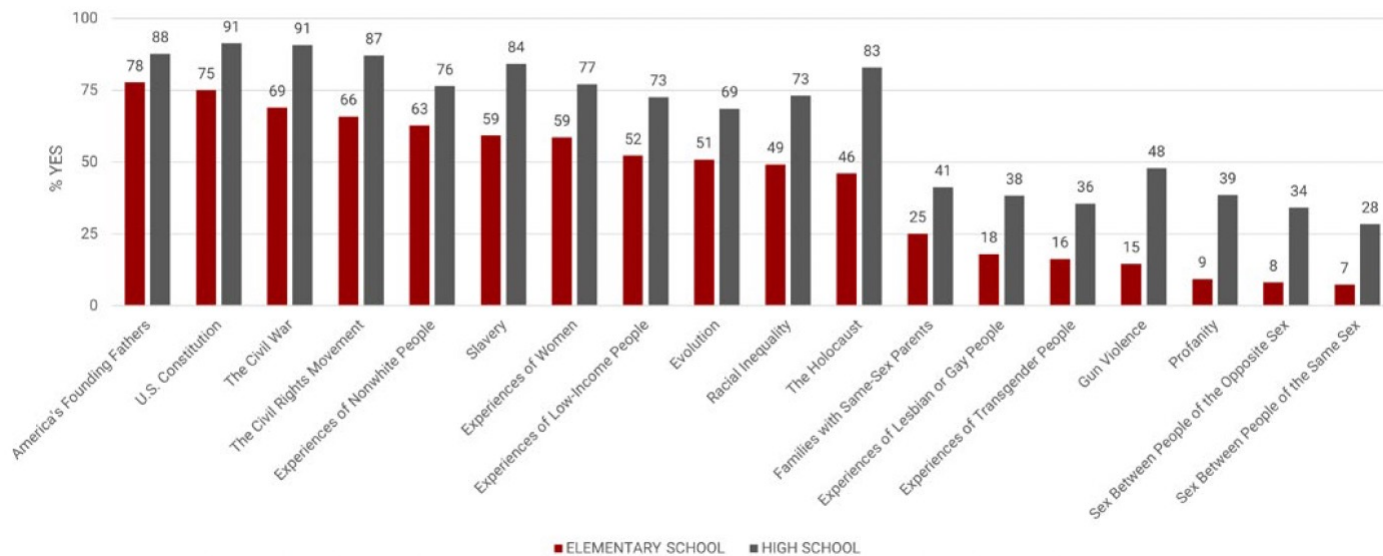
Broad agreement on topic coverage; largest splits on LGBT/sexuality

Figure 11: Bipartisan agreement on the topics to teach and not teach in elementary school



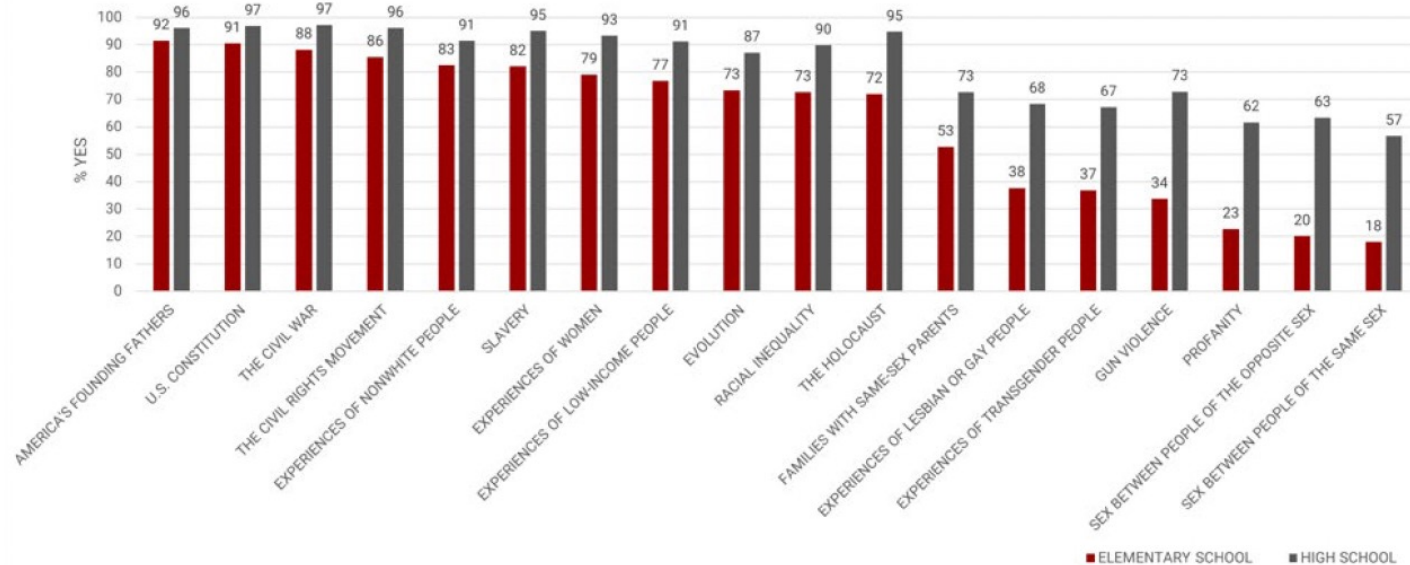
Americans are opposed to assigning books on some controversial topics, especially for elementary schoolers

Figure 12: Americans are not comfortable with assigning books focused on certain controversial issues, though widely support others.



...But support availability of most books in libraries, especially for high schoolers

Figure 13: Adults think high school students should have access to books across controversial topics, with mixed support for elementary school students



So overall

- “Parents’ rights” is probably a politically smart framing—most people believe parents should have rights, and indeed more rights than they think parents currently have.
- Taking controversial content out of elementary school, especially LGBT content, is likely a political winner in all but the bluest of places.
- In secondary school, voters seem to want controversial content, but with a “balanced” perspective.
- Taking books with controversial content (especially LGBT content and sexual content) out of elementary schools is likely to be popular.
- Purging libraries of books, especially for older children, is likely to be less popular.

School choice is on the march

Gov. Reynolds signs Students First Act into law

Tuesday, January 24, 2023 | Press Release

Politics & Government

It's not just Utah, other conservative states are seeing a school choice policy push

KUER 90.1 | By [Associated Press](#)
Published January 27, 2023 at 8:45 AM MST



Why the sudden wave of choice policies?

- Leveraging the “parents’ rights” argument to put a wedge between (mainly conservative) parents and public schools.
- Aggressive gerrymandering and legislative domination in Republican-held states means no Democratic support is needed.
- Some dissatisfaction with how public schools handled COVID closures (again, I think mainly partisan-driven), masking policies, etc.
- Vouchers more popular with parents than charter schools.
- Favorable courts unlikely to invalidate new school choice laws.

But voucher programs have mixed effectiveness

- Early/small/urban studies show some positive effects
- More recent/larger/statewide studies show more negative effects
- More positive effects on attainment outcomes, worse effects on achievement
- Consistently small but positive competitive effects
- And we only know about these effects because there was some external evaluation/accountability
- ... Not that evidence of effectiveness really matters in these cases

And they create political messes and may exacerbate segregation of various kinds

EDUCATION

'I felt very unsafe': Gay fathers confronted at Arizona religious school accepting vouchers



Renata Cló

Arizona Republic

Published 7:00 a.m. MT Feb. 6, 2023 | Updated 2:35 p.m. MT Feb. 6, 2023

EDUCATION

Do Private-School Vouchers Promote Segregation?

A new report from the Century Foundation evaluates the claim.

By Aria Bendix

NATIONAL AND WORLD

Florida private Christian school asks LGBTQ students to leave

by: Justin Schecker, [Nexstar Media Wire](#)

Posted: Aug 19, 2022 / 10:41 PM EDT

Updated: Aug 20, 2022 / 08:08 AM EDT

And how is COVID recovery going?

We know a lot about the impact of COVID on academic achievement

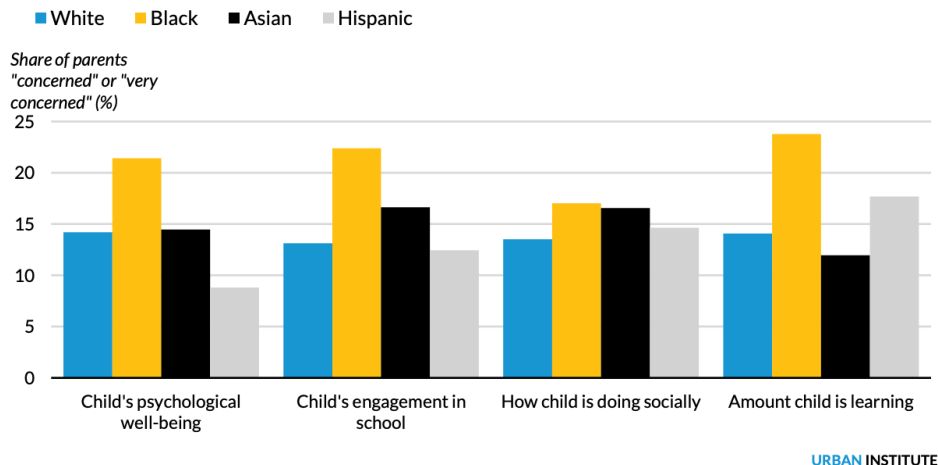
- Declines relative to pre-COVID trends in both math and ELA
- Larger declines in mathematics
- Greater recovery to date in ELA
- Larger declines for students at the bottom of the achievement distribution (i.e., gaps between high- and low-achievers have widened)
- Larger declines in schools that were closed for in-person instruction for longer
- Larger declines for kids from historically marginalized groups (e.g., based on race/ethnicity, income)

But parents aren't as concerned as experts

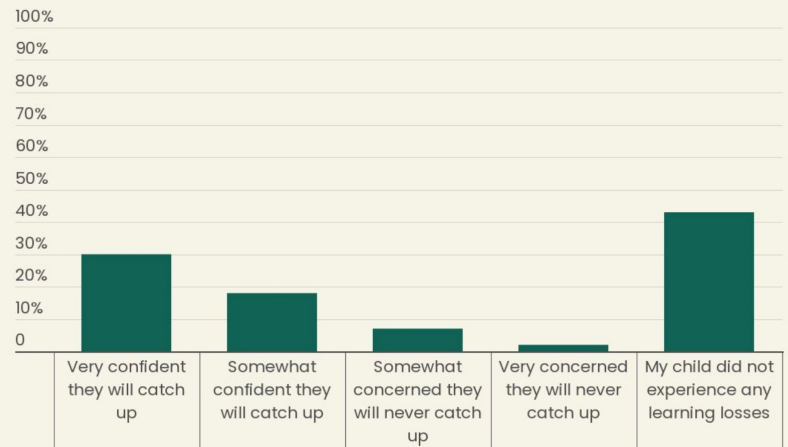
ANALYSIS

Experts Say Kids Are Far Behind After COVID; Parents Shrug. Why the Disconnect?

FIGURE 1
More Black Parents Than Non-Black Parents Report Concerns



Survey of parents of 3,204 students in grades K-12: How confident are you that kids will recover from COVID learning loss?



And intervention availability/uptake is not enough to solve our problems

FIGURE 3

Offerings of Interventions Do Not Align with Interest, by Race or Ethnicity

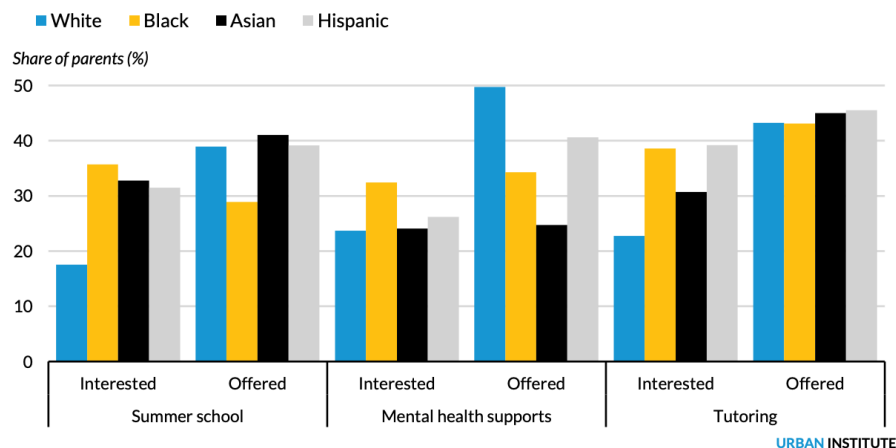
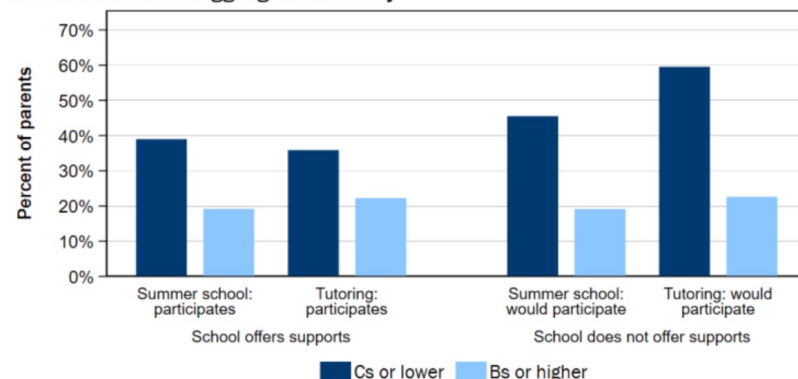


Figure 2: Parents are more likely to use (or want) learning recovery programs if their children are struggling academically



Note: Survey responses were collected during the spring of the 2021-22 school year. Results are nationally representative.
Source: USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research's Understanding America Survey (UAS 461).

B | Governance Studies
at BROOKINGS

Survey: Nearly Half of Students Started Last Fall Below Grade Level — Usually in Math and Reading — but Tutoring Remains Elusive

Only 1 in 10 students received the kind of high-dosage tutoring experts believe is most effective in reversing learning loss

There are many likely reasons for the disconnect

- Hard for parents to know what “normal” progress is
- Effect of COVID for any one kid is relatively modest (and lots of kids have no effect at all)
- Grades seem to have been inflated during COVID (continuing a preexisting trend)
- Gap in state/other testing
- Reporting of kids’ test results is a mess
- Logistical barriers in the way of intervention uptake

Implications for administrators

- Emerging education politics around choice and culture wars likely to stick around through at least 2024—coping strategies needed.
- Expect increasing and ongoing polarization between blue and red state education policies for the foreseeable future.
- COVID recovery is just going to turn into business as usual—creative approaches needed to address the most harmed.
- Public schools increasingly caught under demographic and choice-induced strain; enrollment declines.
- There is a large sane middle that is drowned out by loud voices on the extremes—work to make the centrist case.

Thank you

polikoff@usc.edu

Twitter @mpolikoff