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UChicago Harris/AP-NORC Poll: No Public Consensus on How Schools Should Teach about Racism and Discuss Sexuality

Half of Americans say parents and teachers have too little influence on classroom curriculum

CHICAGO, April 14, 2022— As several state and local governments consider bills that prohibit teaching about sexual identity and issues around race, there is no public consensus about the role of public schools in teaching children about these issues, according to a new study from the [University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy](#) and [The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research](#). About a quarter of Americans say teachers in their local public school are focusing on racism and sexuality too much, while about a third think they are focusing too little on these issues.

The new study also reveals 50% of Americans believe parents do not have enough influence on classroom curriculum and 51% think the same for teachers.

Democrats are more likely to say teachers have too little influence (62%) and Republicans are more likely to report parents have too little influence (65%). However, there are no significant differences in attitudes about the role of parents on curriculum between parents of children attending K-12 schools and the rest of the public.

“There are some school policies that have clearly been polarized along party lines such as teaching about racism or discussion of sexuality,” said Adam Zelizer, an assistant professor at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy. “However, the increasing partisanship around school boards has not led to as large of partisan divides on other issues such as prohibiting books from being taught or relying on standardized testing to measure student achievement. Even on a salient, contentious topic like policing in schools, differences between Democrats and Republicans are not as large as one might have expected.”

There are sharp differences between Democrats and Republicans when it comes to support for allowing transgender students to use bathrooms that match their preferred gender identity (52% vs. 9%) or renaming schools named after historical figures that supported slavery or segregation (52% vs. 14%). However, majorities of both Democrats and Republicans do not

favor policies that prohibit books about divisive topics or prevent teachers from teaching about sex and sexuality.

While many Democrats and Republicans are not satisfied with policies surrounding the teaching of race and sexuality in schools, less than half of Americans have followed news about their local school board or voted in school board elections during the last five years.

“Few Americans report paying close attention to their local school boards, but this could change if school policies continue to gain national attention,” said David Sterrett, senior research scientist with The AP-NORC Center. “Public opinion around school policies and curriculum could also shift in the coming year if these become more prominent political issues during the midterm elections.”

Among the other key findings from the report:

- Republicans are more likely than independents and Democrats to think schools are focusing too much on racism in the United States (47% vs. 30% vs. 9%) and discussing issues related to sex and sexuality too much (42% vs. 25% vs. 8%).
- 58% of Americans oppose policies that prohibit books about divisive topics from being taught in schools and 53% oppose policies that prohibit teachers from teaching about sex and sexuality in schools.
- Parents of children attending K-12 schools are less likely than the rest of the public to favor vaccine (33% vs. 46%) and mask mandates (29% vs. 39%) for students attending schools in-person.
- Over the last five years, few have engaged with their local school board beyond following news or voting in school board elections, with just 12% of Americans reporting that they attended a local school board meeting and 15% saying that they communicated with a school board member.

About the Study

This study was conducted by the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research with funding from NORC at the University of Chicago. Staff from Harris Public Policy and The AP-NORC Center collaborated on all aspects of the study. Interviews for this survey were conducted between March 17 and 21, 2022, with adults age 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 1,030 completed the survey. Interviews were conducted in English. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.0 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error for

parents of children attending K-12 schools is +/- 8.1 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. The margin of sampling error may be higher for other subgroups.

A full description of the study methodology for the survey can be found at the end of the report on www.apnorc.org.

The proper description of the survey's authorship is as follows: This study was conducted jointly by the [University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy](#) and [The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research](#).

About the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy

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The two organizations have established The AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research to conduct, analyze, and distribute social science research in the public interest on newsworthy topics, and to use the power of journalism to tell the stories that research reveals. In its 10 years, The AP-NORC Center has conducted more than 250 studies exploring the critical issues facing the public, covering topics like health care, the economy, COVID-19, trust in media, and more.

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