

Essential Educators:

Teacher and Parent Views on COVID-19

Findings from a Public Agenda National Survey



Essential Educators: Teacher and Parent Views on COVID-19

Findings from a Public Agenda National Survey

A report from Public Agenda by David Schleifer,
Rebecca Silliman and Erin McNally

Support for this project was provided by the William
and Flora Hewlett Foundation and Charles and Lynn
Schusterman Family Philanthropies

January 2021

Available online at
<https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/teacher-narratives-1/>

Copyright © 2021 Public Agenda

All photos in this report are by Allison Shelley for
American Education: Images of Teachers and Students
in Action, used under the Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 license (CC BY-NC 4.0)
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



Findings in Brief

After a challenging fall semester, a national survey from Public Agenda finds that K-12 teachers and parents are largely on the same page regarding education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Just over half of both teachers and parents feel that their communities value teachers more now than before the pandemic. While only one-third of parents think that they can fill teachers' roles, most parents and teachers think in-person teaching during the pandemic is risky. Most parents and teachers also think teachers themselves should have a voice in deciding whether to hold in-person classes. However, both parents and teachers feel torn over whether in-person classes are worth the risks.

As COVID-19 vaccination efforts continue to roll out, somewhat more teachers than parents favor requiring both teachers and students to be vaccinated in order to hold in-person classes. Somewhat more teachers than parents also favor suspending standardized testing during the pandemic. However, both teachers and parents feel strongly that schools must provide teachers with the resources to effectively teach online and to support themselves and their students socially and emotionally. Methodological details are at the end of this report.

Findings in Detail

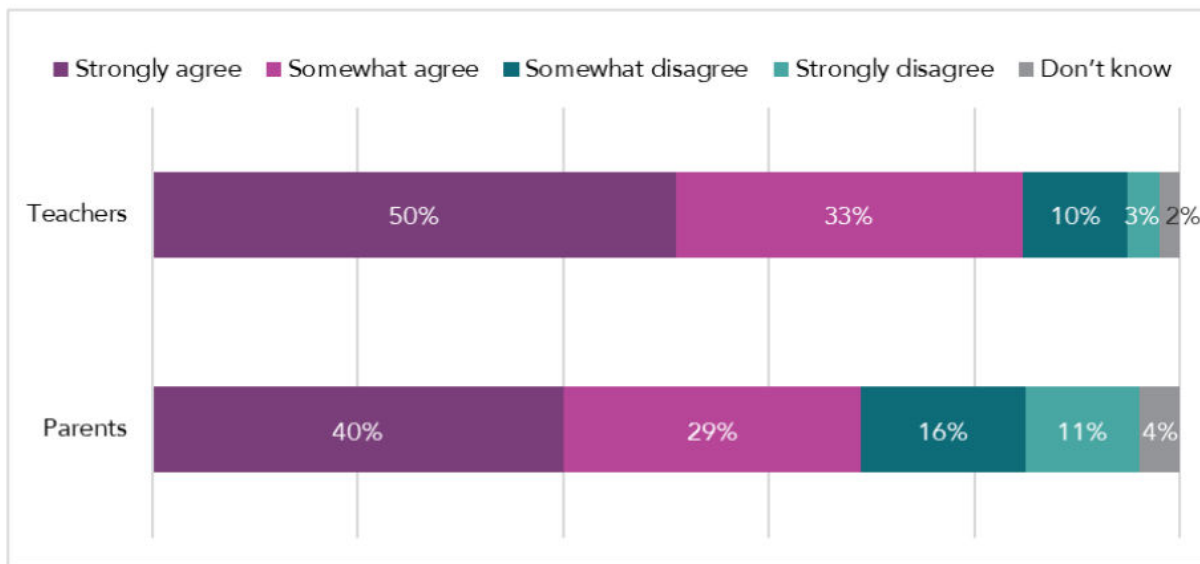
FINDING 1: Most teachers and parents think teaching in person during the pandemic is risky and that teachers themselves should decide whether to hold in-person classes.

After a fall semester in which 78 percent of parents of K-12 students had at least one child learning entirely or partially online, K-12 public school teachers and parents are largely on the same page regarding many of the education issues that have emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹

For example, most teachers and most parents think teaching in person during the pandemic is risky; see figure 1. Most teachers think they should decide whether to hold in-person classes during the pandemic, and most parents agree that teachers should decide; see figure 2.

Most teachers and parents think teaching in person during the pandemic is risky.

Figure 1. Percent of K-12 public school teachers and percent of parents of K-12 students who agree or disagree that teachers are putting their lives and their families' lives in danger if they have to teach in person during the COVID-19 pandemic:



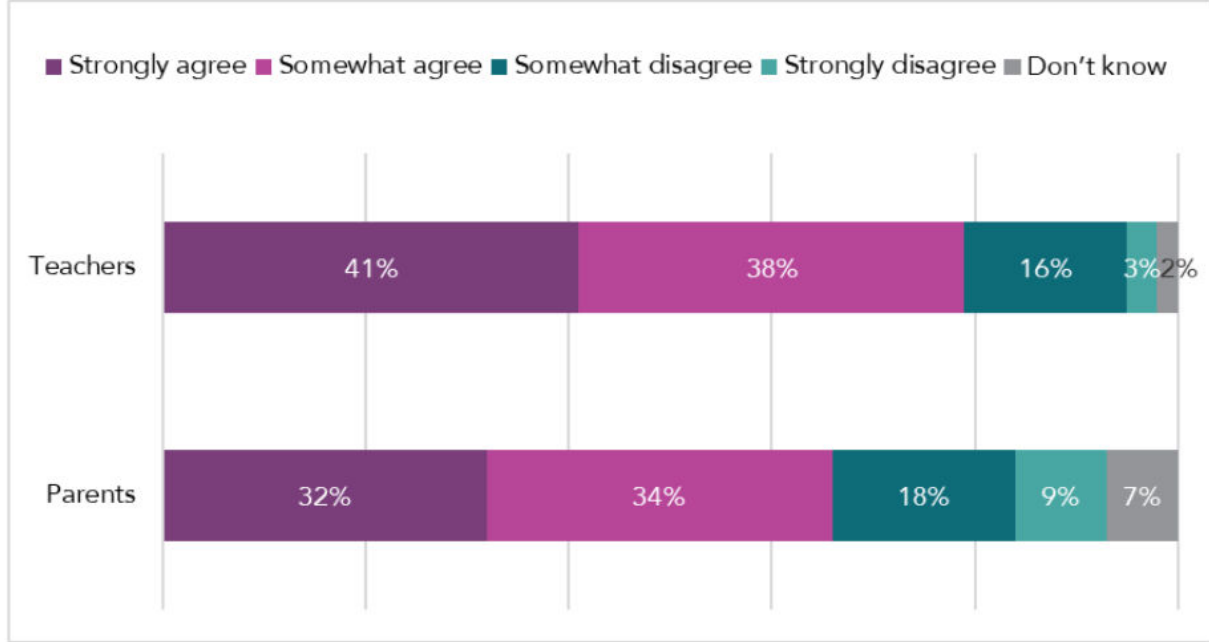
Base: Teachers, N=702; Parents, N=706.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

¹ The parents surveyed were all parents of K-12 students. The teachers surveyed were all K-12 public school teachers, including teachers in charter schools and excluding teachers in private schools.

Most teachers think they should decide whether to hold in-person classes during the pandemic, and most parents agree.

Figure 2. Percent of K-12 public school teachers and percent of parents of K-12 students who agree or disagree that teachers should be able to decide whether to teach online or in person during the COVID-19 pandemic:



Base: Teachers, N=702; Parents, N=706.
 Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

While teachers and parents agree on many education issues that have emerged during the pandemic, there are differences of opinion by political affiliation. For example, while most Americans (73 percent) believe that teachers are putting their lives and their families’ lives in danger if they have to teach in person during the COVID-19 pandemic, more Democrats (89 percent) and Independents (76 percent) than Republicans (52 percent) feel that way.² While 65 percent of Americans think that teachers should be able to decide whether to teach online or in person, more Democrats (73 percent) and Independents (72 percent) think so than Republicans (54 percent). These findings are consistent with previous research showing that more Democrats than Republicans see COVID-19 as a major threat to the U.S. population.³

² “Democrats” includes people who describe themselves as Democrats and those who say they lean Democratic. “Republicans” includes people who describe themselves as Republicans and those who say they lean Republican.

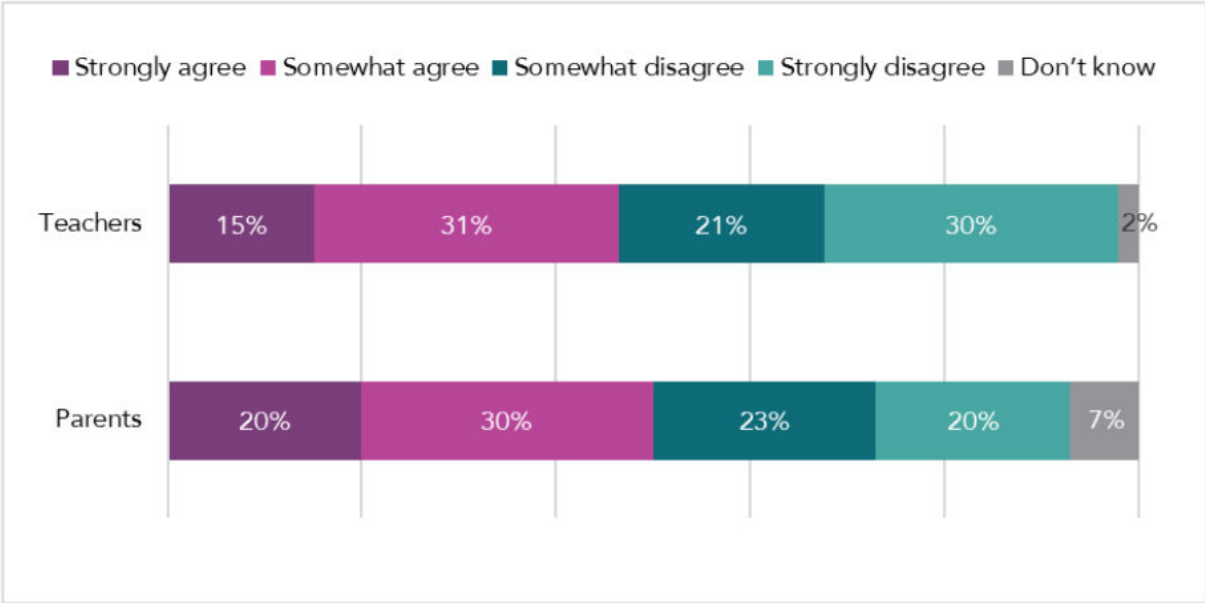
³ Cary Funk and Alec Tyson, “Intent to Get a COVID-19 Vaccine Rises to 60% as Confidence in Research and Development Process Increases,” Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2020. <https://pewrsr.ch/3c4eeMQ>

FINDING 2: Both teachers and parents feel torn over whether in-person classes are worth the risks.

For example, about half of teachers and half of parents say that despite the risk of COVID-19, teachers should hold in-person classes since that is the best way for students to learn—while about half of teachers and half of parents either disagree or are unsure. Similarly, about four in ten teachers and four in ten parents say that despite the risk of COVID-19, teachers should hold in-person classes so that parents can get back to work—while the remainder in each group either disagree or are unsure; see figures 3a and 3b.

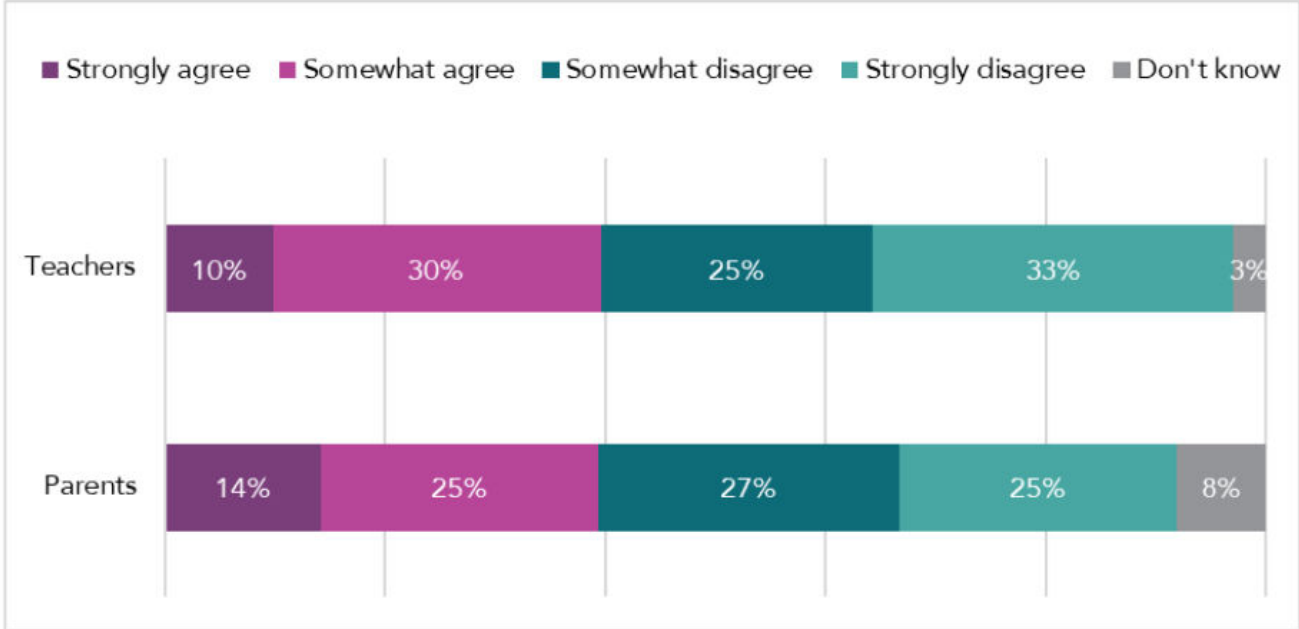
Both teachers and parents feel torn over whether in-person classes are worth the risks, whether for the sake of student learning or so that parents can get back to work.

Figure 3a. Percent of K-12 public school teachers and percent of parents of K-12 students who agree or disagree that despite the risk of COVID-19, teachers should hold in-person classes since that is the best way for students to learn:



Base: Teachers, N=702; Parents, N=706.
Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

Figure 3b. Percent of K-12 public school teachers and percent of parents of K-12 students who agree or disagree that despite the risk of COVID-19, teachers should hold in-person classes so that parents can get back to work:



Base: Teachers, N=702; Parents, N=706.
 Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

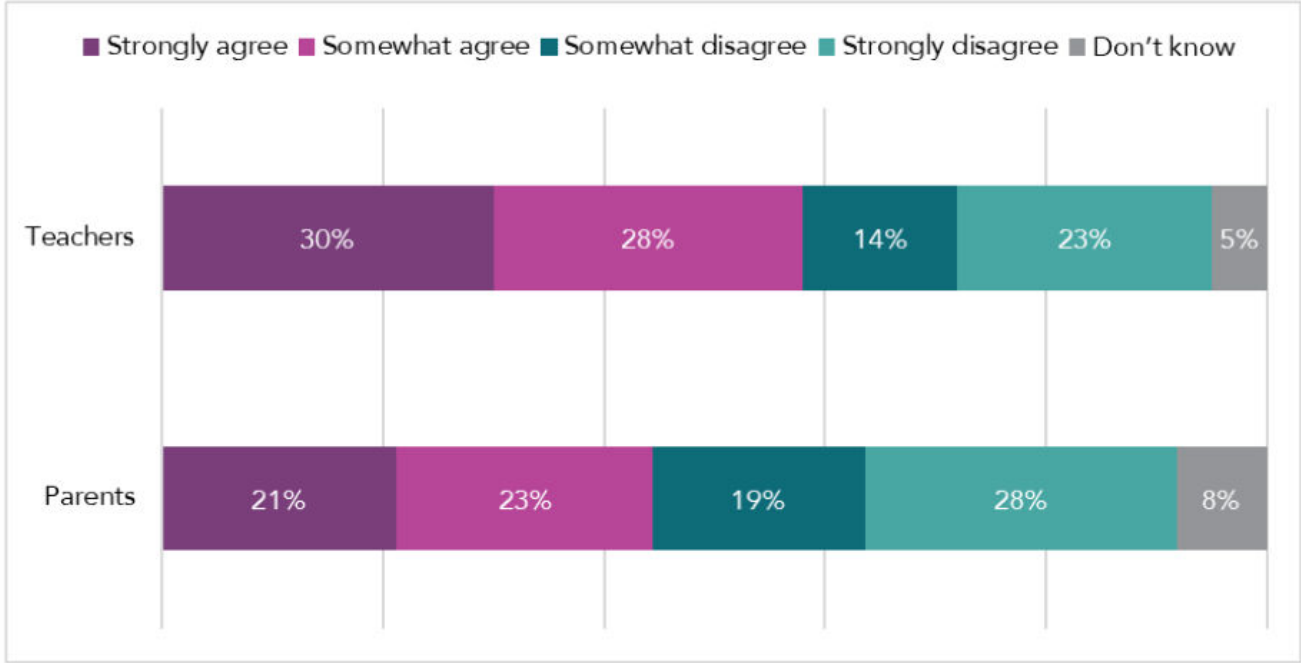
However, there are differences by political affiliation in whether people think teaching in person is worth the risks, with more Republicans favoring in-person classes. For example, 63 percent of Republicans say teachers should hold in-person classes because it is the best way for students to learn, compared to 41 percent of Independents and only 25 percent of Democrats. Similarly, 59 percent of Republicans say that teachers should hold in-person classes so parents can go back to work, compared to 42 percent of Independents and only 22 percent of Democrats.

FINDING 3: Somewhat more teachers than parents think that students and teachers should be required to get vaccinated for COVID-19 in order to hold in-person classes.

As COVID-19 vaccination efforts continue to roll out, more teachers than parents favor requiring all teachers and students to be vaccinated in order to hold in-person classes—although the difference is of only 14 percentage points; see figure 4.

Somewhat more teachers than parents favor requiring teachers and students to get vaccinated for COVID-19 in order to hold in-person classes.

Figure 4. Percent of K-12 public school teachers and percent of parents of K-12 students who agree or disagree that once a COVID-19 vaccine is available, all teachers and students should be required to be vaccinated if they want to have in-person classes:

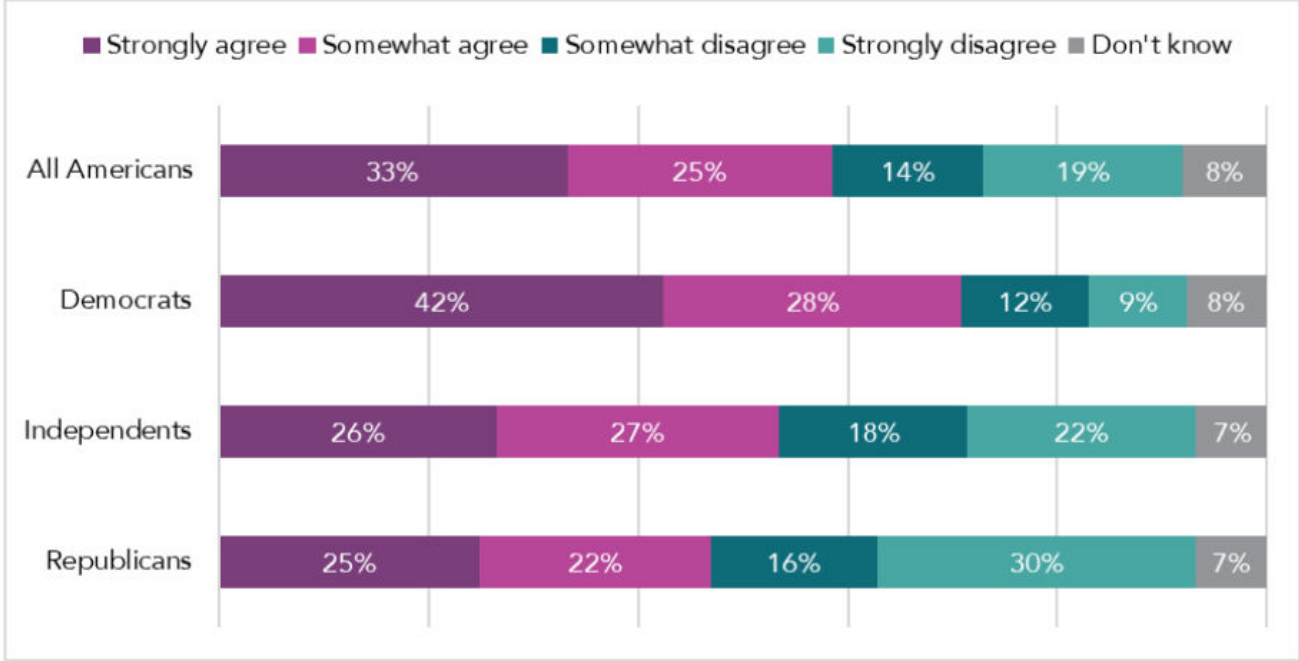


Base: Teachers, N=702; Parents, N=706.
Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

This research found no statistically significant differences by race in views on requiring teachers or students to be vaccinated. However, views on vaccination differ somewhat by political affiliation, with about 70 percent of Democrats saying that teachers and students should be required to be vaccinated compared to about half each of Independents and Republicans; see figure 5.

Just over half of Americans favor requiring teachers and students to get vaccinated for COVID-19, including more Democrats than Republicans or Independents.

Figure 5. Percent of Americans who agree or disagree that once a COVID-19 vaccine is available, all teachers and students should be required to be vaccinated if they want to have in-person classes, by political affiliation:



Base: All Americans, N=3,130; Democrats/Democrat leaning, N=1,645; Independents, N=183; Republicans/Republican leaning, N=1,110.

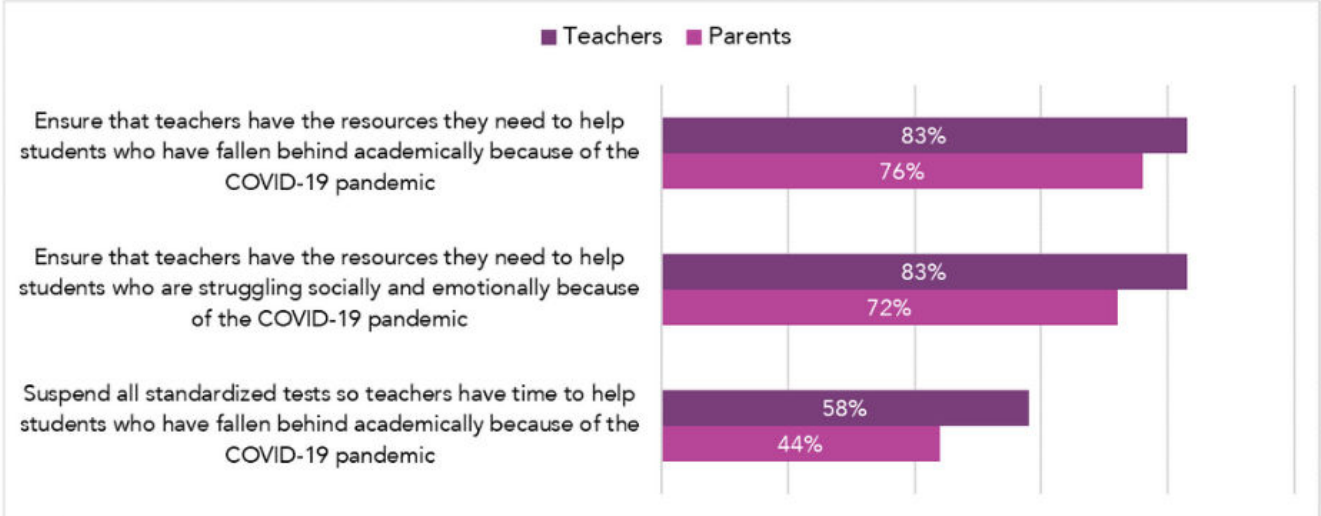
Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

FINDING 4: Teachers and parents feel strongly that schools must help teachers support students during the pandemic. Somewhat more teachers than parents favor suspending standardized testing.

Strong majorities of both teachers and parents believe it is absolutely essential for K-12 public schools to ensure that teachers have the resources they need to help students who have fallen behind academically or are struggling socially and emotionally due to the COVID-19 pandemic. By only a 14 percentage point margin, more teachers than parents favor suspending standardized testing so that they have time to help students who have fallen behind academically; see figure 6.

Teachers and parents feel strongly that schools must help teachers support students. Somewhat more teachers than parents favor suspending standardized testing.

Figure 6. Percent of K-12 public school teachers and percent of parents of K-12 students who say it is absolutely essential for K-12 public schools to do each of the following during this school year:



Base: Teachers, N=702; Parents, N=706.
Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

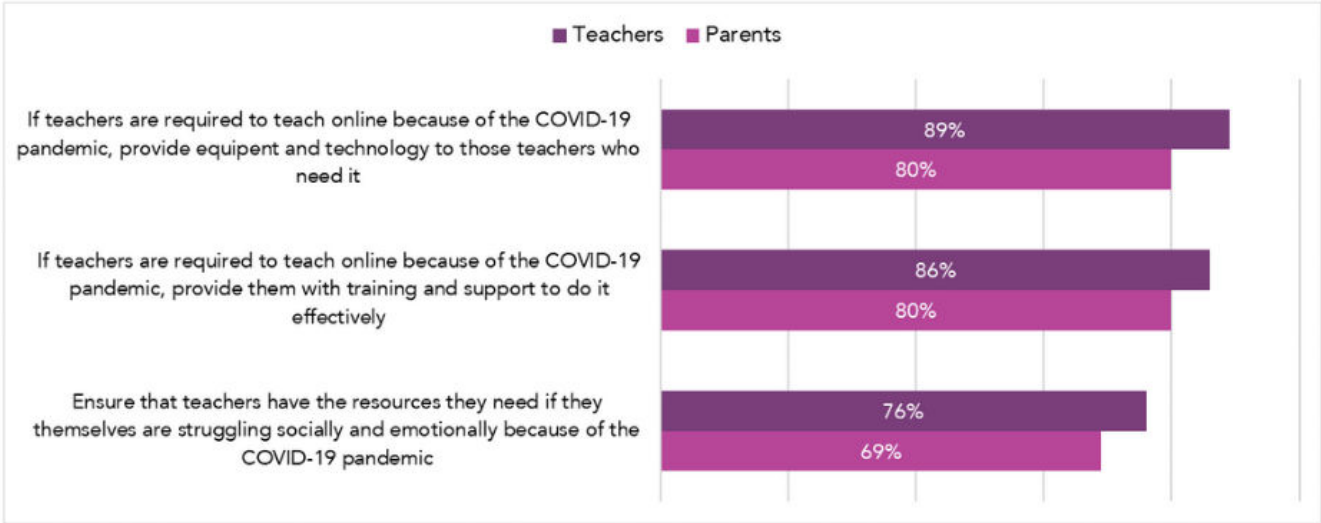
FINDING 5: Teachers want social and emotional support from their schools as well as help with teaching online. Parents recognize teachers’ need for support.

Teachers want their schools to support them during the pandemic, and parents largely recognize teachers’ need for support. For example, about two-thirds of teachers and two-thirds of parents say it is absolutely essential for K-12 public schools to ensure that teachers have the resources they need if they are struggling socially and emotionally because of the pandemic; see figure 7.

Furthermore, strong majorities of both teachers and parents say that if teachers must teach online, it is absolutely essential for public schools to provide training and support to do it effectively and to provide equipment and technology to those teachers who need it; see figure 7.

Teachers want social and emotional support from their schools as well as help with teaching online. Parents recognize teachers’ need for support.

Figure 7. Percent of K-12 public school teachers and percent of parents of K-12 students who say it is absolutely essential for K-12 public schools to do each of the following during this school year:



Base: Teachers, N=702; Parents, N=706.
Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.

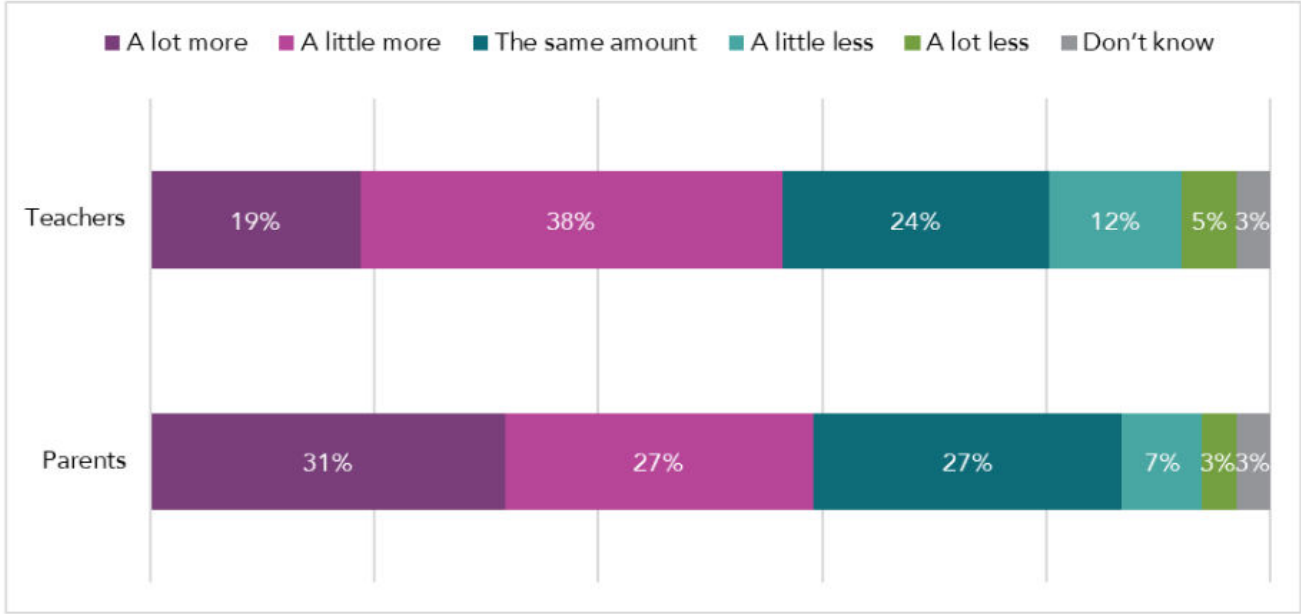
FINDING 6: Most teachers and parents think that communities value teachers more now than before the pandemic, but that the pandemic will make recruiting new teachers to the profession more difficult.

Just over half of parents and teachers say that their community values K-12 public school teachers more now than before the COVID-19 pandemic began; see figure 8. Only 31 percent of parents feel that they can easily take on teachers’ roles and ensure that their children get good educations. However, nearly 17 percent of teachers and 10 percent of parents feel that their community actually values teachers less now than before the pandemic.

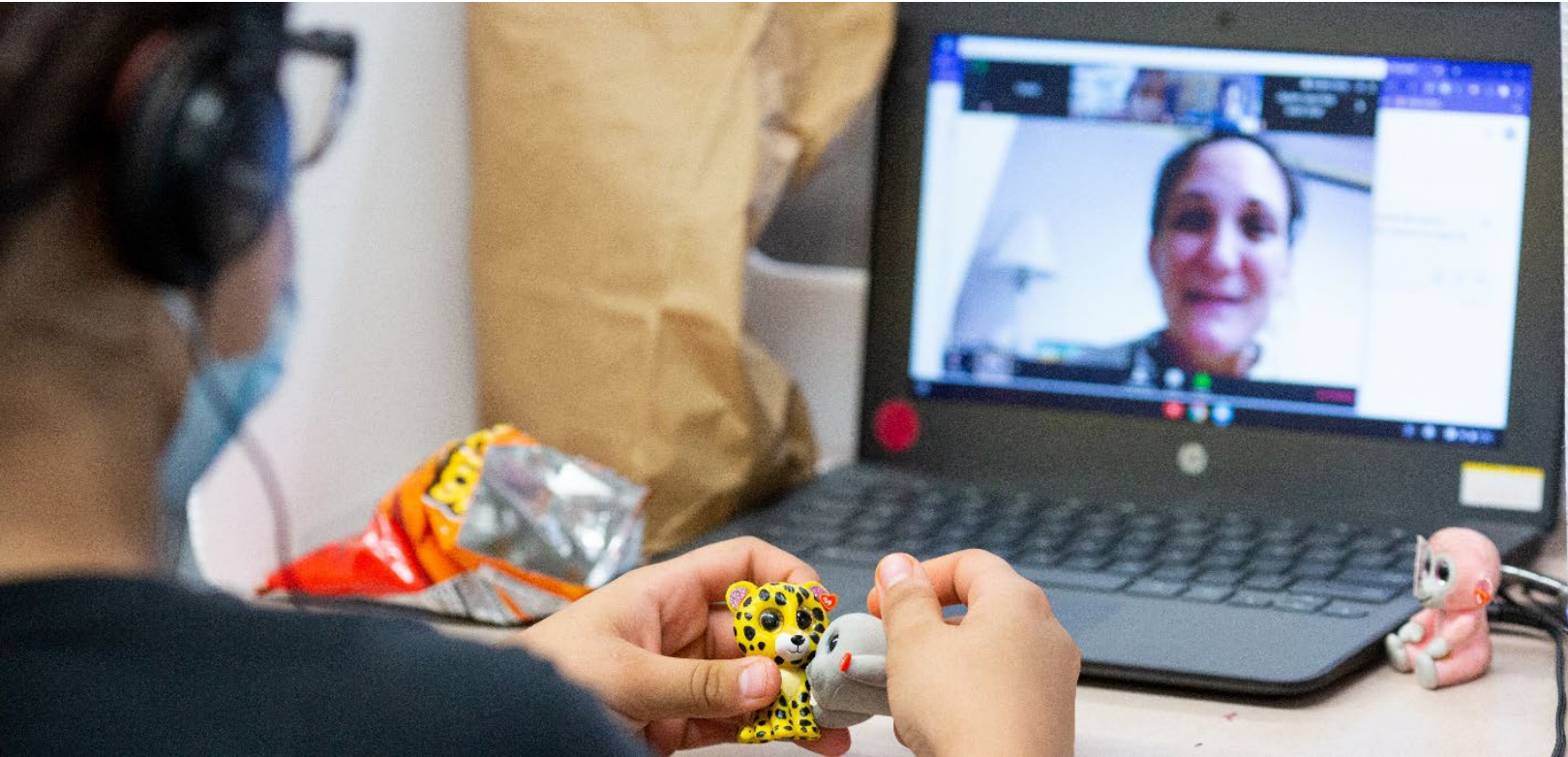
Moreover, most teachers (78 percent) and parents (62 percent) believe that the pandemic will make it even more difficult to recruit new teachers to join the profession.

Most teachers and parents think that communities value teachers more now than before the pandemic.

Figure 8. Percent of K-12 public school teachers and percent of parents of K-12 students who say how much their community values K-12 public school teachers now compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic:



Base: Teachers, N=702; Parents, N=706. Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 1 percent of respondents who refused the question and are not represented in the figure.



Methodology in Brief

These are findings from a nationally representative survey of 3,130 adult Americans 18 years and older conducted by Public Agenda. The survey was fielded November 18 to December 1, 2020 in English and Spanish, by telephone and online. NORC at the University of Chicago fielded the survey. The sample includes 2,684 respondents who were randomly sampled from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak panel, of whom 256 were K-12 public school teachers, including charter school teachers. Another 446 K-12 public school teachers, including charter school teachers, were sampled from Lucid, a non-probability opt-in panel. Private school teachers were excluded from the sample. The general public sample was demographically weighted to the 2020 Current Population Survey and the teacher sample was weighted to the 2017-18 National Teacher and Principal Survey. The margin of error for the total sample is +/- 2.8 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence interval. For the teachers sample, the margin of error is +/- 5.8 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence interval. For parents, the margin of error for parents is +/- 5.1 with a design effect of 1.65.

For a complete methodology and for the survey topline with full question wording, please go to <https://www.publicagenda.org/reports/teacher-narratives-1/> or email research@publicagenda.org.

Support for this research was provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Philanthropies. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundations.