

PRI ISSUE BRIEF

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Voters are More Dissatisfied with Local School Boards than Local Schools New PRI Poll Reveals Why

BY LANCE IZUMI

School boards are at the center of many of today's education controversies, so one must ask what voters actually think about their school boards and, secondly, what can local boards do to address the concerns of parents and the public. A newly released Pacific Research Institute survey helps answer these questions.

While great frustration has been expressed at school board meetings across the country on an array of topics, ranging from critical race theory to woke math curricula, it is often argued by defenders of the status quo that these complaints are limited to only certain locales and are not widely shared. Is that claim true, however?

It turns out that mediocre-to-low opinion of school boards is more widely held than defenders of the status quo would like the public to believe.

Indeed, the results of a 2023 national survey conducted by Echelon Insights for the Pacific Research Institute on the American public's opinion of local schools and school boards are eye opening.

When asked how they would rate the overall performance of their local school board, nearly half of respondents—49 percent—gave their local board a fair/poor/very poor rating. In contrast, just 36 percent gave their board an excellent/good rating.

In fact, school boards received lower ratings than local schools.

Forty-five percent of survey respondents said that the public schools in their local school districts were excellent or good. Still, a greater proportion of respondents—47 percent—said that their local public schools were fair/poor/very poor.

In other words, while the percentage of voters who have a mediocre-to-low opinion of public schools is greater than the proportion that think the public schools are doing well, there is an even greater gap when it comes the performance of school boards.

If a large proportion of voters think that their school board is doing a bad job, what are the reasons behind this dissatisfaction?

Those who rated their school board’s performance as poor or very poor were given a choice of a variety of reasons that could explain their unhappiness with their board. Respondents could choose as many as they thought applied.

Among the possible reasons, four garnered more than 50 percent of selection choices:

- [School boards] are focusing on the wrong goals: 59 percent.
- They don’t listen enough to people they should listen to: 55 percent.
- They are trying to promote their own ideological or personal agenda: 55 percent.
- They allow the wrong people or groups to influence their decisions: 52 percent.

When asked who has too much influence on local school boards, more survey respondents pointed to powerful governments or entrenched special interests rather than parents.

These responses are very revealing. In media reporting on school boards, it is almost universally the case that school board controversies pit left-wing school board members, supported by entrenched special interests such as the teacher unions, versus grassroots parent and community voices. This division can be seen in the survey responses.

When asked who has too much influence on local school boards, more survey respondents pointed to powerful governments or entrenched special interests rather than parents:

- Federal government: 42 percent
- State government: 37 percent
- Teachers’ unions: 26 percent
- Parents of public school students: 14 percent

Further, 43 percent of survey respondents said that parents have too little influence on their school boards, while just 23 percent thought the teachers' unions had too little influence on boards. Only 12 percent thought the federal government had too little influence, while 11 percent thought state government had too little influence.

In other words, parents, who have the biggest stake in school board decision-making, are seen as the least influential group when it comes to impacting board decisions.

It is also interesting to see what survey respondents believed that school boards should do in order to best fulfill their duties.

Respondents were asked to rank, from 1 to 5, a dozen different actions that school boards could take that would be most effective in improving their performance.

Three-and-a-half times as many respondents said that their first or second choice would be for school boards to listen to parents who have children in local public schools than listen to teachers' unions—38 percent to 11 percent.

Even amongst Democrat survey respondents, 27 percent said that their first or second choice would be for school board members to listen to parents of parents of children in local public schools. In contrast, just 18 percent of Democrat respondents said that their first or second choice was for school boards to listen to the teachers' unions.

More than two-and-a-half times as many respondents said that their first or second choice would be for school boards to focus on improving student performance versus advancing social justice and equity in education.

Also, more than two-and-a-half times as many respondents said that their first or second choice would be for school boards to focus on improving student performance versus advancing social justice and equity in education—33 percent to 13 percent.

It is interesting to note that 20 percent of both Democrats and Republicans said that focusing on improving student performance was their first choice regarding the priority area on which school boards should focus. Improving student achievement, therefore, is not a partisan issue.

Also, 32 percent of Democrat respondents said that focusing on raising student performance was their first or second choice regarding the priority area for school boards. In contrast, 22 percent of Democrats respondents said that advancing social justice and equity was their first or second choice for school boards to target.

Further, 31 percent of Black respondents said that focusing on improving student achievement was their first or second choice as to the priority focus area for school boards. In contrast, less than half that proportion—15 percent—of Black respondents said that advancing social justice and equity was their first or second choice for school board focus.

Amongst Hispanics, 33 percent said that focusing on raising student performance was their first or second choice as a school board priority, while less than a third of that proportion—10 percent—said that advancing social justice and equity was their first or second choice for a school board focus.

In other words, regardless of party or race, more respondents said that increasing student achievement, rather than pushing an ideological social justice and equity agenda, should be the top priority of school boards.

So how does this dissatisfaction with school boards actually manifest itself in real life?

The 2023 Pacific Research Institute book *The Great Parent Revolt: How Parents and Grass-roots Leaders are Fighting Critical Race Theory in America's Schools* profiles Nicole Solas, a Rhode Island mom whose school board stonewalled her when she asked about details of her daughter's elementary school curriculum.

Nicole ended up filing 160 public records requests to force her school board to reveal what was being taught in the classroom, including the district's definition of concepts like equity.

The school board, which had actually recommended that she file the public records requests, then threatened to sue Nicole when she did exactly as she was told to do.

The board feared that if the community saw the instructional content Nicole requested, they would not be able to covertly adopt the controversial critical race theory curriculum.

According to Nicole, “my school committee talked about my suspected political motivations, my moral character. They were really looking to ostracize me from society and really destroy my life. And this was really their way of letting everyone know that if you asked too many questions, they were going to attack you.”

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In the end, the school board backed down and withdrew its threat to sue Nicole. Yet, the key ally of the school board, the teachers' union, then threatened to sue Nicole.

The teachers' union claimed that making the curriculum transparent would cause their members to be harassed. That claim, however, is unconstitutional—you can't interfere with someone's civil right to get public information.

Nicole then filed a counterclaim against the union.

What Nicole's school board and its union ally have done to silence her and belittle her concerns is occurring in school districts around the country.

It is no wonder then that the results of the PRI survey indicate that parents and the public see room for improvement with their local schools and school boards. Also, voters want school boards to listen to parents and want boards to focus on what public schools historically have been tasked to do—raise student achievement in math, reading, and the core subjects.

And, importantly, the PRI survey shows that voters of both major parties and from different racial backgrounds value improved student achievement over the political push for social justice and equity indoctrination.

The PRI survey results also help explain the electoral phenomenon of pro-parent candidates winning school board races around the country. If school boards fail to listen to parents, then democracy will punish this political arrogance.

Lance Izumi is senior director of the Center for Education at the Pacific Research Institute. He is the co-author, along with Wenyuan Wu and McKenzie Richards, of the new book *The Great Parent Revolt: How Parents and Grassroots Leaders Are Fighting Critical Race Theory in America's Schools*.