

# Californians and K–12 Education Amid COVID-19 Recovery: Views from the 2021 PACE/USC Rossier Poll

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Growing inequities and lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic together with billions of dollars in new funding present an opportunity to make substantial changes to K–12 education to better serve all students in California. In May 2021, PACE and USC Rossier School of Education fielded our annual poll of California voters, which sought to gain clarity about voters' priorities on public education issues during this period in which Californians are beginning to look towards a postpandemic future. The following are 10 key findings from the poll.

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## Californians have been differentially affected by both the overall and the educational effects of the pandemic.

Twenty-eight percent of voters said their financial situation worsened during the pandemic, 15 percent reported worse general health, and 36 percent reported worse mental and emotional health. Fifty-three percent of parents reported that their children's educational experience was worse than before the pandemic, but 33 percent of parents said that their children's educational experience was better than before.

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## California voters are generally worried about the effects of the pandemic on the state's students.

Regarding the ramifications of the pandemic on students, the following were the areas of greatest concern for California voters: (a) students falling behind academically; (b) the impact on students with special needs, such as those with disabilities and those learning English; and (c) the impact on students' emotional and mental health. For parents, the impact on students' emotional and mental health ranked highest.

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## Despite this challenging year, voters appreciated the work of educators.

This year, California voters gave the highest marks to California schools and teachers since this annual poll was first administered in 2012. Sixty-two percent said they would encourage a young person to become a teacher.

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## However, partisan divisions shape approval of education during the pandemic.

Democrats showed substantially more support for California public schools and teachers than did Republicans, 42 percent of whom gave California public schools a D or F grade. Approval of how well local officials handled school reopening and pandemic schooling also fell along partisan lines, with Democrats more supportive of the work of government officials than Republicans. In terms of overall policy priorities, "climate change" ranked first for Democrats, and "the amount we pay in taxes" was the highest priority for Republicans.

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### Californians noticed increasing divisions on issues of politics and race.

Seventy-eight percent of voters agreed that California has become more divided politically, with 70 percent saying they agree that the state has become more divided on matters of race and 69 percent saying they agree that problems of discrimination and violence based on racial and ethnic differences in the state have gotten worse.

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### These partisan differences translate into how voters prioritize educational issues generally and educational equity issues specifically.

In general, Republicans rated educational issues at a lower level of importance than did Democrats. "Reducing gun violence" was the highest priority for voters in both parties. Democrats' support outstripped Republicans' support for the following policy areas: (a) increasing teacher diversity, (b) improving education funding, and (c) improving access to early childhood education. Also, 82 percent of Democrats said that schools should spend *more* time teaching about the causes and consequences of racism and inequality, while the majority of Republicans (54 percent) said schools should spend *less* time teaching this content.

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### Despite these political divisions, voters enthusiastically support a wide range of targeted supports for meeting students' diverse needs and accelerating learning in the wake of the pandemic.

Among a variety of policies and practices for addressing student needs during the pandemic the following were the five approaches with the highest levels of support: (a) offering summer school; (b) providing intensive tutoring to students who have fallen behind; (c) providing afterschool activities; (d) expanding access to sports, physical education, and outdoor education; and (e) hiring support staff in schools (e.g., counselors, social workers).

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### Voters are in favor of requiring the COVID-19 vaccine for eligible students.

A strong majority of voters (69 percent) agreed with the statement that, should a COVID-19 vaccine be approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for school-age children, that vaccine should be required for all students in California schools, with allowable medical exceptions.

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### Voters support resuming in-person instruction in the fall but also want schools to provide online learning options.

More than 8 in 10 voters agree with the statement that "every K–12 student in the state who wishes to attend school in person in the fall should be able to do so five full days a week." However, about 60 percent of respondents also said that there should continue to be an online option for K–12 students next year.

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### Voters are generally in favor of resuming standardized testing for students after the pandemic.

Overall, 56 percent of voters supported resuming testing on "at least the same schedule as before the pandemic." A higher proportion of parents than nonparents was in favor of reducing the amount of standardized testing.