

1/3 of parents in 3 states may not send children to school because of COVID-19

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Most parents surveyed in three states support safety measures to reduce COVID-19 exposure at school, including decreasing the number of children on buses, daily temperature screens for students, alternating between in-person and online classes, regular testing of school staff, and requiring school staff and older children to wear masks. Credit: Michigan Medicine

Kindergartners in face masks. Closed playground structures. Random COVID-19 testing.

They are among the long list of hypothetical scenarios for [school](#) in the pandemic era.

And as lawmakers and educators reimagine the K-12 model for fall, a new survey assessed parents' plans for in-person school and support for 15 potential measures to reduce the risk of COVID-19 in schools in Illinois, Michigan, and Ohio.

The majority of parents surveyed (two-thirds) said they will likely send all of their [children](#) to school in fall. Most also support certain [safety measures](#), including decreasing the number of children on buses, daily temperature screens for students, alternating between in-person and online classes, regular testing of school staff, and requiring school staff and [older children](#) to wear masks.

The report, published by the Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research Center (CHEAR) at the University of Michigan, included 1,193 parents of school-aged children in the three states who were surveyed from June 12-22.

"Families are facing a challenging decision regarding whether to send their children to school for in-person classes in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic," says lead author Kao-Ping Chua, M.D., Ph.D., a pediatrician and researcher at Michigan Medicine C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, CHEAR and the U-M Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation, which funded the report.

"On the one hand, sending children to school could increase the risk of COVID-19 among children and family members. On the other hand, children who don't return to in-person school may experience disruptions in their education. Some families simply don't have a choice because they need to go to work."

Parents' plans on sending their children to school were similar between each state but varied by demographic factors. Respondents who were Black, Hispanic, or Asian were less likely to report that they will send all of their children to school compared with respondents who were white/non-Hispanic.

Parents from low-income households were the least likely to report that they will send all of their children to school, with 40 % reporting that they are unsure of their plans or are not planning on sending at least one of their children.

"The disparity by household income raises the possibility of potential educational disruption among less advantaged students," Chua says. "Efforts should especially be made to understand and address barriers to school attendance for these students, and to ensure high-quality education for students who do not attend school in-person."

Views on masks and other safety measures

The survey revealed strong support for a number of measures to reduce COVID-19 exposure risk at school. Three-quarters of parents supported daily temperature screens of students and requiring testing of children if a classmate tests positive for COVID-19.

More than 60 % of parents supported decreasing the number of children on buses, alternating groups of children between in-person and virtual classes, staggering arrival and pick-up times, and random weekly COVID-19 testing for staff. Half supported random weekly COVID-19 testing of children and requiring children to eat meals in classrooms rather than cafeterias.

Most parents supported requiring face masks for [school staff](#) and middle and high school students, but were less likely to support requiring [face](#)

[masks](#) for younger children, especially kindergarten through second grade.

Support was low for closing playground structures and stopping all extracurricular programs.

Overall, the average parent supported or strongly supported eight of the 15 measures assessed in the survey. While this number was lower in some demographic groups, three-quarters of parents supported four or more measures.

"Preferences for the number and types of measures vary among parents," Chua says. "But they broadly agree with the notion that schools should take steps to keep children as safe as possible."

Factors impacting a return to school

Twelve percent of parents surveyed indicated they will likely not send at least one of their children to school in fall, with health concerns being the biggest factor. Respondents were less likely to say their children would attend in-person school if they believe someone in their home has a condition that increases the risk of severe COVID-19 illness.

But many feel that the in-person school experience is best for their kids.

"I feel like (my child) gets a better education in person. I want her to be able to go to school where she can directly interact with teachers," one Michigan parent said.

Twenty-one percent of parents said they weren't sure yet about school attendance plans. Many are waiting to see how the COVID-19 pandemic evolves, while others are waiting to hear more about their schools' plans.

"If the schools here decide to open, then that will mean we are trending in a favorable direction as far as the virus is concerned. I trust the local school districts to make the best decision based on their staff/cleaning/knowledge of the situation," a parent from Illinois wrote.

Many respondents also indicated they had little choice to send children to school due to jobs and financial constraints.

"We have no family to babysit and do not have the funds to hire a babysitter if the kids stay home. If one of us has to stay home to watch them we will likely lose our house," one Ohio respondent said.

Many families indicated that a surge in COVID-19 cases would cause them to reconsider plans for sending children to school. Others would likely reconsider based on the safety strategies implemented in schools or the type of educational experience their children might have.

Governors across the country are working with educators to develop plans to safely open school. Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer is expected to announce her "Return to School Roadmap" on June 30, which will provide an outline for schools across the state to reopen for in-person learning in fall.

As these plans are announced, Chua believes it will be important to continue to survey parents regarding their plans and support for COVID-19 risk mitigation measures.

"In our survey, parents expressed a lot of uncertainty regarding their plans for school attendance," he says. "Many are waiting to see how schools address safety and how the pandemic evolves. It's very likely that [parents'](#) views and plans will change as new information becomes available."

Provided by University of Michigan

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