

Poll: Learning setbacks a top concern for parents

March 23 2021, by Collin Binkley and Hannah Fingerhut

About 7 in 10 parents are worried about children falling behind academically

A new UChicago Harris/AP-NORC poll finds that parents are more strongly worried about their children falling behind academically and socially than about the spread of COVID-19 from in-person instruction.

As a result of the coronavirus outbreak, how concerned are you about ____ ?

- Extremely/Very concerned**
- Somewhat concerned**
- Not very/Not at all concerned**

Children falling behind academically



Children falling behind socially



Additional infections resulting from in-person schooling



Results shown among parents. The survey of 1,076 U.S. adults, including 273 parents, was conducted Feb. 25–March 1. The margin of error is ± 4.1 percentage points for the full sample.

Source: AP-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research



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Parents across the U.S. are conflicted about reopening schools. Most are at least somewhat worried that a return to the classroom will lead to more coronavirus cases, but there's an even deeper fear that their children are falling behind in school while at home.

Sixty-nine percent of parents are at least somewhat concerned that their children will face setbacks in school because of the coronavirus pandemic, including 42% who say they're very or extremely worried about it, according to a new poll from The University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Nearly as many, 64%, say they are at least somewhat concerned that in-person instruction will lead to more people being infected, but it's only 33% who say they are very or extremely worried about the risk.

That tension reflects the fears of a nation on the cusp of a widespread return to classroom teaching. More than a year after the pandemic started, more schools are now opening their doors to students or plan to do so in coming weeks.

Parents' concerns about their children falling behind were even stronger in an AP-NORC poll last July, after the [school year](#) was interrupted in the spring by the burgeoning pandemic. Concerns about the spread of the virus in general also have ticked down to a low point as many look hopefully to a chance to ease back to normal.

Pressure to reopen schools has come from parents, [state officials](#) and President Joe Biden, who has vowed to have most of the nation's [elementary schools](#) open five days a week in his administration's first 100 days. Even as many schools already offer some level of in-person teaching, there's growing demand to bring students back every day.

For parents, concerns about the pandemic's impact go beyond academics—most also worry at least some that their children will fall behind socially and lose access to school sports and other activities, the poll found.

Maria Sanchez, a mother of four in Hawthorne, California, said the past year has been especially trying for her youngest daughter, Naomi, who's now in sixth grade. Before the pandemic, Naomi was a star student who mostly earned As and Bs. But since classes moved online last year, it hasn't been uncommon to see Ds on her report cards, Sanchez said.

"It just seems so hard for her to understand anything," Sanchez said. Naomi logs on for every class, she added, but the comfort of home makes it harder to focus. "She doesn't take notes. She's not writing anything," Sanchez said. "She's not learning anything."

Sanchez welcomed the recent news that Naomi's school is planning a return to classroom instruction. But her relief was joined by fears about the virus spreading within the school district, where she works as a food services manager.

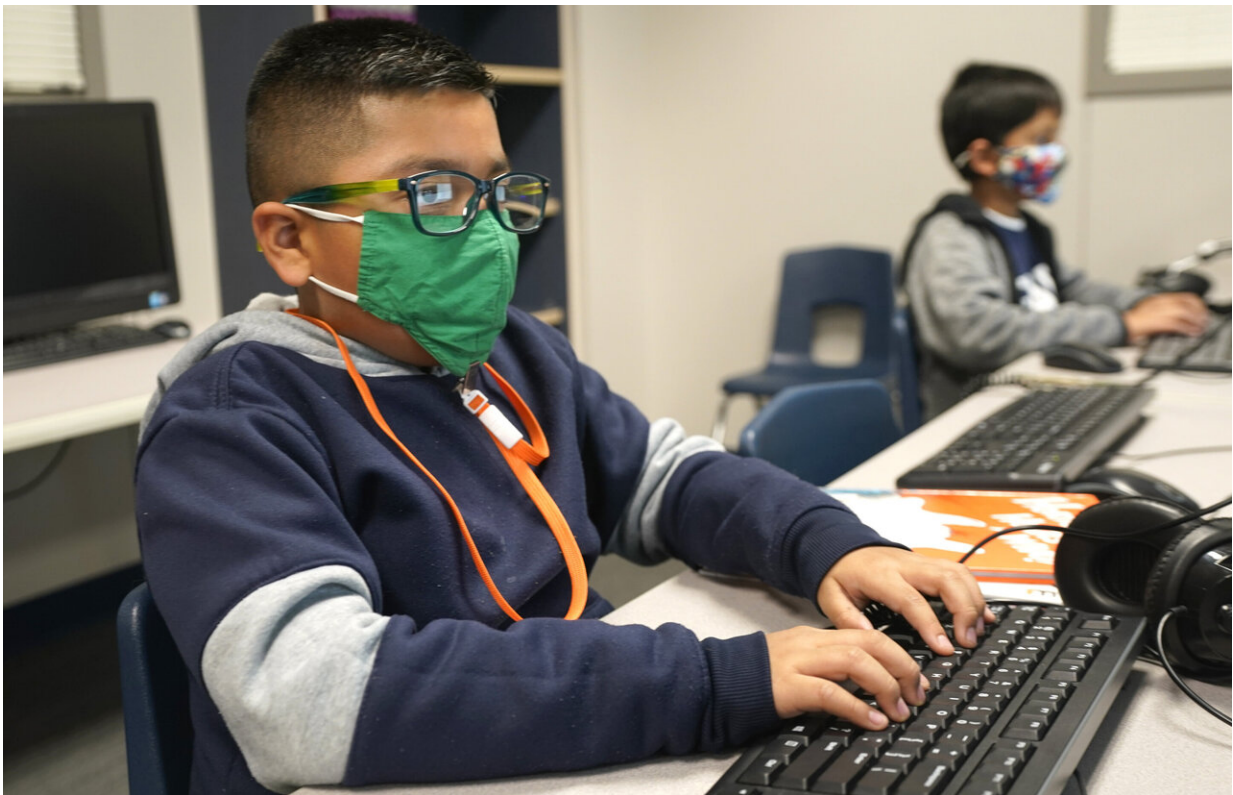
"Even though I'm happy they're opening the school and my daughter gets to go back and do her best, I'm still concerned about the virus," she said.

Last month the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released guidelines saying [schools can safely reopen](#) with masks, social distancing and other measures even if teachers have not received vaccines. Even in areas with higher virus rates, the agency said, younger students are generally safe to continue with classroom instruction.

Despite the CDC's guidance, however, Americans remain divided over what's needed for a safe reopening. Most say masks are important, but it's not a universal expectation: 62% say it's essential to require masks

among students and teachers, while 22% say it's important but not essential, the poll found.

The CDC last week relaxed its social distancing guidelines in schools, saying it's safe to seat students as close as 3 feet (0.9 meters) apart. The agency previously recommended 6 feet (1.8 meters), leading many schools to reduce classes to half their usual size. Just under half of Americans said they think it's essential to limit class sizes, however, while another 4 in 10 said it's important but not required.



In this Dec. 3, 2020, file photo, students wearing face masks work on computers at Tibbals Elementary School in Murphy, Texas. A new poll from The University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds that most parents fear that their children are falling behind in school while at home during the pandemic (AP

Photo/LM Otero, File)

Hoping to speed up the return to the classroom, the Biden administration recently ordered all states to prioritize teachers and other school staff in their vaccine rollouts. The move was seen as a victory for teachers unions, some of which demanded vaccines even after the CDC said shots were not a requirement to reopen safely.

But Americans disagree on the need for teacher vaccines. About 4 in 10 say it's essential, while about a third say it's important but not essential.

The clashing opinions have translated to a patchwork of policies. While some states have already made vaccines available to all teachers, some have just started to make them eligible. And while many states continue to require masks in schools, states have lifted mandates, allowing districts to decide their own policies.

Biden's recently signed \$1.9 trillion relief bill includes more than \$120 billion to help schools reopen and recover from the pandemic. At least 20% of that must be spent on efforts to address learning setbacks worsened by the pandemic.

Most Americans embrace that kind of effort: 81% said they support government-funded summer school or tutoring to help students who fall behind, and just 6% are opposed. Another 12% didn't have an opinion.

Frustrations over online learning have also sparked hope among school choice advocates that more families will turn to education options beyond their traditional public schools. Several states have introduced legislation to create or expand voucher programs for that purpose, and many parents indicated support for those kinds of programs has ticked

up.

Forty-six percent support tax-funded vouchers for low-income students to pay for tuition at private or religious schools, while 31% are opposed. In an AP-NORC poll in December 2019, Americans were more closely divided, with 42% in favor and 37% opposed.

Support is even higher among Black Americans, with 62% in favor, up somewhat from 53% in 2019.

Although parents' fears about learning setbacks seem to outweigh their fears of the virus, some families are in no rush to reopen schools.

Jessica Battle, of Hamtramck, Michigan, said her daughters, ages 5 and 7, have continued to learn while in online classes. Her older daughter, Sadie, is where she should be in reading and math, and her younger daughter, Clara, enjoys her prekindergarten program. In a recent school survey, Battle said she supports a return to [school](#), but she's on the fence.

"I would be content keeping them at home the rest of the year, too," she said. "The teachers have been great at maintaining their classrooms, and both of my kids really like their teachers."

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