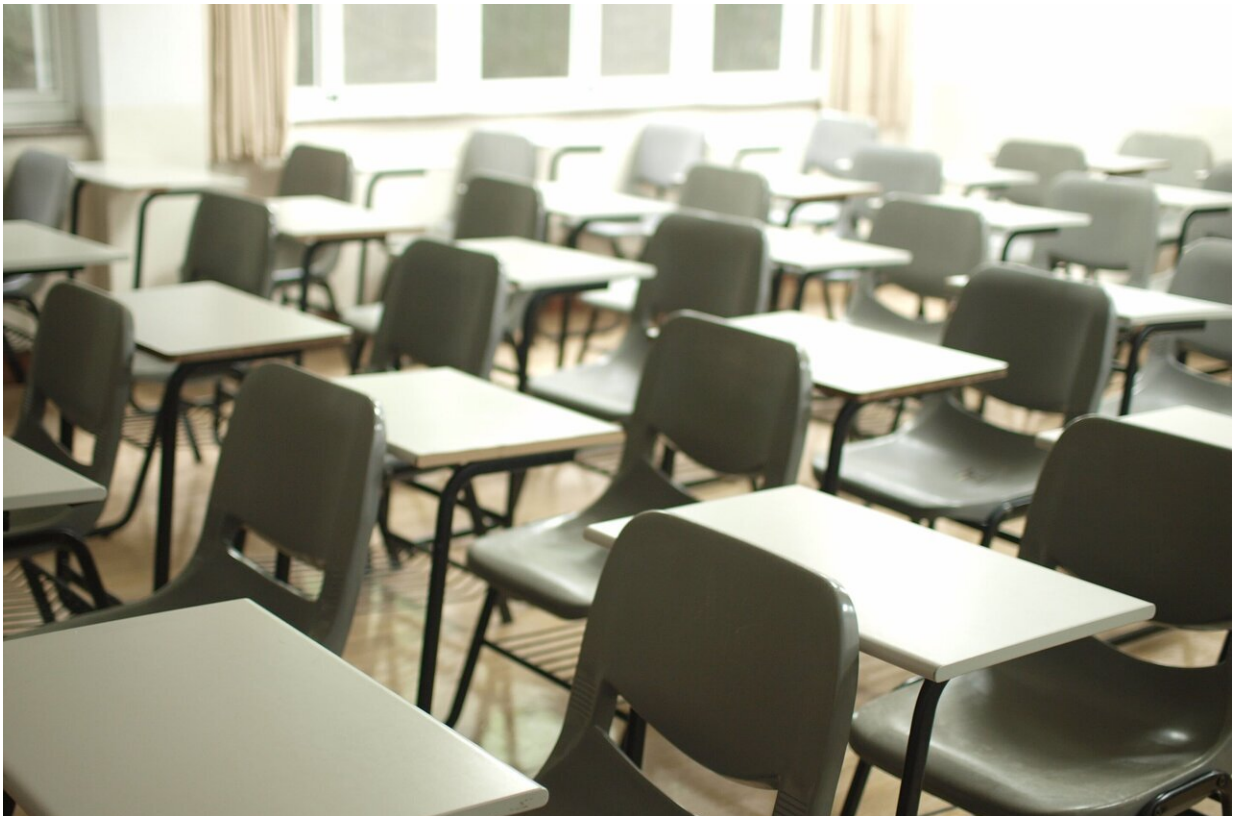


Dissatisfied parents demand superintendents, school boards step up their game, expert says

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School district leaders including superintendents and board members are under increasing pressure from parents to show better results, according to research by an expert at Rice University's Jones Graduate School of

Business. Among superintendents there is an increasing trend of higher turnover, and among board members there is an increased risk of facing election challenges.

To reverse these trends, school district leaders not only need to embrace customer focus but work together collaboratively, according to an analysis of a survey of 19,618 K-12 parents by Vikas Mittal, the J. Hugh Liedtke Professor of Management-Marketing at Rice. These parents rated their satisfaction with their child's school, and this allowed a comparison of dissatisfied and satisfied parents on different issues.

Both satisfied (65%) and dissatisfied (61%) are equally likely to agree that "[school closures](#) related to the COVID-19 pandemic hurt their child's educational performance." Yet satisfied parents (65%) are 3.8 times more likely to agree than dissatisfied parents (17%) that their "child's school is laser focused on academic excellence." This is perhaps why satisfied (66%) parents are 3.5 times more likely than dissatisfied parents (19%) to state that "the U.S. has one of the best schooling systems in the world," Mittal explained.

The gap translates to parents' opinion about school district leadership. Specifically, satisfied parents (69%) are 3.2 times more likely than dissatisfied parents (21%) to agree that "the superintendent at their school district is focused on academic excellence."

Satisfied parents (65%) compared to dissatisfied parents (25%) are more likely to agree their "district's board is able to hold the superintendent accountable" and that "board members at their school district care about the community they represent" (68% versus 20%). Both satisfied (83%) and dissatisfied (71%) believe "parents should be able to speak up at school meetings" and "have a greater voice in deciding what is taught in schools" (64% vs. 57%).

The work is [published](#) in the *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*.

"This study's measure of parent satisfaction is a statistically valid and reliable harbinger of academic performance," Mittal said.

"Rather than dismissing it as mere opinion, superintendents and school boards must change their thinking and behaviors to focus on customer value.

"Superintendents and boards at many mediocre and failing [school districts](#) are caught in a vicious downward spiral of stakeholder appeasement, initiative proliferation and patchwork strategy based on salience and intuitive leaps. They spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on unscientific listening that leads to wasteful initiatives and interventions.

"Even as they verbalize the desire to cater to students and parents—their focal customers—many superintendents spend their time, energy and resources on appeasing different powerbrokers and stakeholders, including board members. When dissatisfied parents believe the [board members](#) are unable to hold the superintendent accountable, they want to speak up.

"To succeed, superintendents of mediocre and failing schools need to let go of legacy strategy planning and implementation which is rooted in stakeholder appeasement. They need to understand that a school district cannot buy its way to academic excellence with relentless spending on initiatives, [software packages](#), mind-numbing teacher trainings, metrics tracking and reporting. They may be doing 'something' but not the right things.

"To succeed, superintendents and school leaders need to embrace

science and customer focus. COVID-19 has provided school district leaders with an opportunity to increase parent satisfaction and academic achievement. They must claim it."

More information: Vikas Mittal et al, Revitalizing educational institutions through customer focus, *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science* (2024). [DOI: 10.1007/s11747-024-01007-y](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11747-024-01007-y)

Provided by Rice University

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