



**“Real Parent Voice – Real Parent Choice”
Parents Across America's National Parent Survey 2017**

Report of Findings

August 15, 2017

*Listen to the parents!!!! We want healthy foods. We want longer lunch periods. We want recess. We don't want screen time. We don't want candy rewards. We don't want reward charts. We want involved learning. We want sports, arts, science, school gardens, libraries, music and joy!**

Parents Across America (PAA) is a grassroots organization founded in 2010 that connects parents of all backgrounds across the United States to share ideas and work together to improve our nation's public schools. PAA has 47 chapters and affiliates in 26 states.

On July 1, 2017, PAA initiated our first national parent survey, “Real Parent Voice – Real Parent Choice.” Our goal was to hear directly from parents about what really matters to them in public education, and to share their voices with our political and policy making leaders. We will also apply what we learn from the survey to our own work.

By August 1, when we closed the survey, we had received responses from 584 people, nearly all of them current or former public school parents. Responses came from 33 states. More detail about the survey development and process can be found at the end of this report.

What's so special about parent voices in education?

PAA believes that public education is the very foundation of our freedom and democracy and that every child deserves a high-quality education that is child-centered, relies on skilled professionals, and promotes justice, equity and democracy (see our full position paper, “What is a Quality Education” (<https://tinyurl.com/y9b6pahh>)).

** Italics indicate written comments from PAA's 2017 parent survey.*

Parents occupy a central role in education primarily because of our essential and intense responsibility to our children and their well-being. We are their first teacher, strongest advocate, and most enthusiastic cheerleader. The greatest desire of most parents is that their children be safe, happy and fulfilled. We know that education is the only real path to that well-rounded, successful life.

It makes sense, then, that one of the greatest American educators framed his approach to education this way:

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.

– John Dewey, *The School and Social Progress*

Unfortunately, many of our political leaders, prompted by corporate interests looking for a piece of the “education marketplace,” have been using a phony, distorted version of parental concerns in making education policy. They assert that what parents really want is to shop around for a school. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos even suggested that we should be able to choose a school the way we choose a cell phone service (speech in Salt Lake City on May 9, 2017 <https://tinyurl.com/y73ofar9>). Congress and the administration have consistently used the terms “parent choice” and “parent empowerment” in a form of doublespeak, that is, using them deceptively to cover up their real goals of expanding charter schools or implementing vouchers.

Responses to our survey made it clear that a lot of what parents think or want is nothing like what Congress, education profiteers or wealthy education philanthropists claim that we think and want. ***We are simply not willing to let them speak for us, about us, as they throw millions of precious education dollars at one failed experiment after another.***

Survey results

The following report highlights the issues that emerged in our survey as the top priorities for parents. Because our goal was to draw out and share authentic parent voices, much of the report consists of parents' written comments, which are italicized throughout.

We organized the survey into three parts, each with a handful of statements to be rated on a scale, with space at the end of each section for written comments. One section asked parents to indicate the importance to them of various aspects of education. Another asked parents for their opinions on a few specific issues. The third section went a little deeper into the topic of personalized learning, an area of special concern for PAA.

I. Parents' top priorities

Parent voices on school funding and resources

Public schools are the backbone of our democracy. We are obligated to educate our nation's children for the common good. When public schools are fully funded, everyone benefits.

99.5% of respondents said that adequate funding was very important or important. This echoes the results of national polls on education (e.g. the annual Phi Delta Kappan/Gallup poll, (<http://pdkpoll.pdkintl.org/> ; a recent AFT poll, <https://tinyurl.com/y7qj92u2>).

Despite this strong support for increased public school funding, school budgets are being cut and cut again. The NAACP reports (<https://tinyurl.com/ybof6qol>) that “in 36 states, public school funding has not yet returned to pre-2008 levels before the great recession, and in many states, inner city schools have experienced the deepest cuts.” The United States continues to have one of the most unequal school funding systems of any country in the industrialized world, resulting in the current shameful opportunity gap.

I believe that resources (financial and otherwise) should be directed first to areas with the greatest need. Then all should be funded fairly.

I just bent over backwards to make sure we lived in a neighborhood with a high quality neighborhood public school.... In my city, schools either have a vibrant support organization with political and financial backing coming from well-off families, or the schools make do with the insufficient resources provided by the central board. Once a neighborhood school is established as the former, home prices shoot into the 7-figure range, perpetuating a cycle of schools for wealthy children getting what they need and everyone else not.

It's not that our nation doesn't have the money. Congress, states and districts have poured billions into the privatization of education via the expansion of charter schools, online learning, and other programs that have not improved education and in many cases have failed to adequately educate our students.

We need to stop the hoax that our public schools are failing and fully fund our public schools to meet the needs of every population. Charter schools are NOT more successful than our public schools and they rob our students to support corporate profits.

The push by Secretary DeVos and others to make federal Title I funds “portable,” that is, for them to follow the student in a voucher or other process, is simply one more way to skim students and the funding they generate away from public schools.

Parent voices on the need for arts, music, drama, sports, and other physical activities

Coming in a close second in importance for nearly 98% of respondents was the need for programs beyond the so-called “core curriculum.” Parent voices are especially important to listen to here. Parents know what a difference it makes to their children when the school day includes hands-on, engaging activities. When we ask, “What did you do in school today?” we are simply elated when our children report something that they enjoyed or that was meaningful to them.

PE and Arts have been so minimized that students are getting these as infrequently as once per week, which is just nuts. All research shows the connection to physical activity and learning, and aside from that we should be educating students for life, meaning teaching them to be health conscious and to enjoy sports beyond the school walls and beyond adolescence.

Schools need to have access to enrichments for all students. If that comes at the cost of some other assets so be it. Those are things that keep kids healthy and engaged and able to learn the academics.

Fundraisers should not be the source of revenue for special area subjects such as art and music.

Parent voices on other issues

Bullying: While the issue of bullying was not identified as a top priority in the context of our survey, it generated the most written comments, with opinions varying widely:

Students should be involved with writing the rules of bullying towards peers in schools and school staff should be trained on not to bully students or intimidation towards students and families.

I've noticed how anti-bullying programs tend to make all children feel like they are victims... so then the children are calling each other bullies.

Bullying is the #1 overhyped problem in schools. Yes, technology exacerbates the situation but this issue has existed for generations.

Anti-bullying programs wouldn't be needed if exposure to TV / screens etc was dramatically reduced in the households.

Two of my children were bullied at school with supposed another bullying program. The consequences given to the bully were ineffective and not even appropriate to amount of bullying. Schools are not following through at all. The victims would get a more severe consequence if they defended themselves than the bully. That didn't even make sense to me.

Parent involvement: Ironically, parents' comments about the value of parent involvement were quite mixed. Many of the comments were the "yes...but" variety, with many also expressing strong trust in and reliance on educators to do what's best for students:

Parent partnership with educators is paramount, but the educators are the experts, and parents should not have undue influence on sections about which they do not have the background or knowledge.

Of course parent involvement is important, but parents are not always experts in education.

Within reason parents must be part of the decision making body; yet, they should seek the expertise of educators to evaluate what impact their decisions have on schools and students.

After years of a child in school, some well-meaning parent involvement can be more harmful than helpful.

We need to be careful about how involved parents get in policy making. We aren't educators. If too many people get involved no decisions get made and the policies become so grey they aren't enforceable. We need to give trust back to the people who make the policies and help enforce them as parents, assuming they are just and fair.

I believe parents should have input into policies but frankly school committees have the responsibility make, review and revise school policies and school officials have the responsibility to implement policies.

Teachers are the professionals, not parents. Yes to parental involvement and having a school-parent team to support each student. No to parents having too much power calling the shots on policy and other educ decisions if they are not trained in the field.

Other comments were more clearly positive toward greater parent participation:

In order for our schools to succeed, parents must be invited to be partners in decision making and respected for their ideas even if they differ from what is traditional. When parents feel ownership in decision making they tend to encourage their children to own their behavior.

Informed parents are the key to the success of the children.

We need public meetings, PTA work groups and other such involvement to provide the training so families can make informed decisions.... Until parents use the power granted to them by law we will continue to see more charters, fewer trained teachers/admins and less parent involvement.... These are the tools parents need to utilize, but don't realize they have them and don't know how to use them.

For parent involvement, all parent voices must be sought in culturally relevant ways and given authentic consideration.

We need to get parents involved in their local schools. Leaving it up to others has gotten us to where we are - corporate takeover of education.

On testing: *I'm sick to death of standardized assessments.*

The schools treat kids like robots. Milestones are ruining children. Kids are not allowed to be kids.

It's all about tests tests and more tests. Teachers are not able to teach anymore.

They are like robots too. Common core is ruining our kids and their future. Common core needs to be thrown out. Our kids with IEPs should not be forced to take tests at any age or grade that is not on their skill sets. They too are being set up to fail. The school system isn't focused on children.

The children do not get educations. They get drilled for tests.

For my kids, the testing mania is worse now than it was under NCLB. My kids spend a huge portion of their school year preparing for and taking standardized tests. The school is spending a lot of its resources on computers and networks to enable computer testing. The tests are ridiculously hard and confusing and add nothing to my kids' learning. Instead they are stressful and significantly increase their anxiety and low self-esteem, even though they do relatively well. I hate it. The only reason I don't opt them out is they beg me not to because it would be "boring and embarrassing" to sit in the office.

II. Parents' opinions mirror national charter school controversy

Public, charter, choice, private - they are all a mess.... Public schools need more local control and more funding, charters and privates dilute the resources that the public schools need - and yet these special schools cannot access resources either.

87% of respondents agreed strongly that public schools should be run by elected school boards, not private management companies, which is how most charter schools operate. Yet the least number of respondents (less than half) agreed strongly that charter schools have harmed, not helped, their local neighborhood schools.

PAA believes that this mixed response to charter schools reflects a number of forces at work in our nation today. First and foremost, our education system is under duress, with the result that too many students are not getting the quality education we owe them. We believe that this duress has been caused by a number of factors including:

- persistent under-funding and unequal funding of schools,
- moves by wealthy philanthropists to fill budget gaps with private funds designated by the funders for programs that often harm schools instead of helping them,

- pressure from the federal government to increase testing for the purpose of labeling and closing schools,
- well-funded propaganda efforts to undermine public trust in public schools and promote a false narrative about charter school success, and
- the mercenary interests of some corporations to profit from the “education marketplace.”

The weakening of our democratic public school system puts parents in a terrible spot. National polls show that the preference of the vast majority of parents is to send their children to a quality public school near home (<https://tinyurl.com/y8ydg58>). Additionally, the 2016 [Phi Delta Kappa International poll about K-12](#) found that by a ratio of six to one, the American public wants struggling schools to remain open instead of being closed. The poll found that 84 percent of Americans want officials to overhaul those struggling schools in some fashion, while just 14 percent say they prefer those schools to be shut down. However, the poll also found that this result doesn't necessarily mean the public doesn't want major changes at those schools.

For parents, this is not just an academic or a survey question. We believe that the quality of our children's K-12 education is critical to their future success. The dilemma is this simple: Option A: do we send our children to our local neighborhood school, which has been undermined and attacked by corporate “reform” and has little local political support, or Option B: do we contribute to the overall weakening of the public school system by choosing a charter school which may benefit from the generosity of private donors and the freedom to push out disruptive students?

We absolutely sympathize and understand the choice of parents who pick Option B. Here are some of their voices:

*As I parent who has had children in public, private and charter schools
I believe it up to individual families to decide what works for them and their children.*

They've provided better options when the public school choices aren't adequate.

*Parents should have a choice. If their neighborhood school is inadequate or doesn't offer a safe,
productive learning environment then other options should be available to them.
If the local school cannot provide students with this then other options need to be made available
either thru vouchers or charter schools.*

*If we continue to have troubled, income segregated neighborhood schools that cannot provide
excellent services to all their students, parents will seek vouchers, charters, any other option that
presents a bigger perception of success for students. Whether it is a perception or a reality.*

*The public schools have failed in too many neighborhoods, especially poor ones where families have
no options. This is about the kids. Instead of all kids having to go to a school where learning is
challenging at best, let at least some have a opportunity to be better educated.*

On the difference between chain or franchise charters and more locally-grown charters

*Depends on the type of charter. There are some good ones out there.
The private-for-profit charters are not in that group.*

Please do not generalize about charter schools. The ones in our city are a lifesaver... BTW this is not a private charter school. It originated as the college's lab school where teachers got to observe and teach and implement various learning models.

A few Independent, unionized charters are okay. It's the chains that do the damage.

Some public charters are great! Private charters have been harmful.

More parents had a negative view of charter schools

Charter schools are no choice. I wish people knew that.

I'm a reformed Charter parent.

Charters are in it for the money. They skim off the cheapest to educate and if there are discipline issues the kids are returned to the public school. WRONG.

*Stop putting our tax money into hyper-disciplinary charter schools
and invest that money back into the arts and recess!*

The charter schools in my district are also quite segregated by race, class, and disability. Concentrating the neediest children in the true public schools represents a huge, only partially funded burden.

Charter schools have funneled precious public money to private companies who do not always have children's best interests at heart. Studies show they only fare marginally better than public schools, even though they do not have to handle the behavior problems that public school teachers do.

The majority of charter schools have an D or F grade, but are continued to be promoted as a great alternative?? This takes away money from your public school. Not something to promote.

While there are no charter schools within a reasonable distance of my local public schools (therein not directly taking students from our local schools), because Indiana funds from the state level, our local public schools have taken significant hits in their funding as more and more of the state budget goes to charter school enrollment, vouchers for non-public schools, and loan forgiveness for charter schools. This has had a real impact, removing instructional aides from buildings and decreasing programming that used to provide real value for public school students.

I know there are a few good charter schools that are run by their parents and teachers not for-profit companies. But in my experience these schools are exclusive in that they require parents to donate and volunteer. They also harm the regular public schools by creaming off families with the greatest resources and ability to improve their children's school.

Charter schools have let down students and districts. They have not been innovative, they have not accepted all kids and they have taken money from school district in need of that money.

Charter schools cherry pick students. They don't want children with learning disabilities or behavior problems. They are not equal opportunity for all children schools.

More on elected school boards

Another theme emerged from the comments on elected school boards. Many parents were concerned about recent school board elections which have looked more like corporate take-overs than exercises in democracy. Astroturf groups like Stand for Children have accessed hundreds of thousands of dollars to donate to school board campaigns in an effort to take over certain school boards. This has led in some cases to boards that represent wealthy corporate reformers more than the people who actually use the schools. This may be more a problem of campaign finance reform than a flaw in our system of democracy, but it is a very real issue.

Although I continue to believe in an elected school board, (our) public school elected officials are a mess. They lie and hide information regarding harmful elements in our schools. They are not able to manage contracts and spend money outrageously. I think there are situations when a management company may do better. However, there needs to be a vote and it needs to continue to be reviewed and voted on whether to continue or return to a traditional school board. Forcing management companies to answer to the voters and prove themselves would help to keep them honest and follow through on their promises.

Private management companies can not escape the profit motive in their business model, therefore our students will never be the first priority of private management. An appointed school board is also acceptable, local elected officials still responsible first to the public (parents and students), not shareholders! Public funded education is one of the foundations of our republic, capitalism was/is not.

I highly resent MY TAX DOLLARS paying for private schools (vouchers, some charters, and religious) in which I HAVE NO SAY. These non public institutions are undemocratic!!!

Public tax dollars should be used for public schools with elected boards. These schools should be secular, as per separation of church and state, and be required to accept any and all children. They should also all be held to the same standards.

Elected school boards or appointed school boards both have to conform to sunshine laws and hold open meetings. Elections for school boards have their problems, and have led in more than one district where I've lived to religious partisans, anti-government activists, and privatizers taking seats on public school boards. So the better question, which I'd give an unqualified "strongly agree" to, is whether a public district board is better than a management organization.

I strongly support neighborhood public schools but our elected school boards are run by outside corporate interests that have lobbied political parties to pass legislation in their interests. Charter schools will never be the solution but I can't say that our neighborhood school is serving our children well by hoisting Common Core and testing on us with its one-size-fits-all program.

It is very important to maintain democratically-run public schools. I know that many charter schools do not care about what parents think. They give themselves high salaries and tell you to leave if you are not happy with the school. They take scarce funds away from public schools.

III. What parents know and think about the push for personalized learning

In the third section of the survey, we wanted to get a closer read on parents' knowledge and understanding about the current push for so-called "personalized learning." Over the past months, many parents have contacted PAA with concerns about this movement and how it is already impacting their children and the nature of schooling. Schools, school districts, states and the federal government are requiring ever-increasing technology time without informed input from parents, and with little oversight of the effects of these devices and programs on children's health and even less monitoring of their academic effectiveness. Driving this effort are educational publishers, software marketers, and others working to monetize schooling and gather and use private student data for their own benefit.

PAA adopted a position statement (<https://tinyurl.com/y8zbowyst>) on what we are calling "EdTech," and developed a set of materials to explain our position and help inform and support parents looking into the situation in their children's schools. Our statement says in part:

PAA is speaking out for balanced, healthy classrooms for our children. While we do not oppose appropriate use of technology, we reject the misuse and overuse being forced on our nation's schools by corporate interests and misguided politicians. We strongly oppose the push to increase student screen time, replace teachers with packaged lessons delivered by digital devices, and continuously test students, data-mining the results. We are very concerned that the massive and growing use of EdTech** is displacing valuable elements of schooling without providing clear benefits, and threatening our children's right to a healthy and educationally-appropriate school environment.

This survey section was written from PAA's perspective, and three respondents, including one of the few who felt that the EdTech movement was beneficial, criticized us for that:

It's obvious that this survey wants only a negative response to "personalized learning", but technology is here and it is crucial that we use it to give our students as much of an advantage as possible. I have seen my child fall behind due to class sizes and was able to catch up on a year's worth of math in less than a month when the teacher put him on a program specifically designed to ingrain the steps he missed in his learning processes.

But the vast majority of comments reflected parents' growing alarm and anger about the EdTech takeover:

My biggest concern is the added screen time and the further taking away from students learning how to interact with people who are different than them - a critical life skill that employers continuously say today's graduates are missing.

Personalized learning is a euphemism for put 'em in front of the computer and let 'em go for a few hours!!

Online learning is also a way for the providers of programming, rather than teachers and school boards and State Ed Depts, to control curriculum.

This is an incredibly under reported aspect of technology and its influence on children's learning and brain development.

"Personalized learning" is a movement to get rid of teachers and classrooms to create mindless drones.

*This stuff is scary. It puts our children at risk in many ways.
Our children need to be protected from this.*

The surveillance state is a fact, not a paranoid delusion. Adults are complicit and complacent in allowing themselves to be monitored. But children are defenseless.

This is a far more serious problem than generally recognized.

*The tech push is happening way too fast and with little/no parental input.
There are too many questions not being answered until it's too late.
Schools need to do much more research and preparation before pushing tech into the hands of all the kids. Tech should be about what will benefit the students, not what will benefit tech ed companies, school official and politician careers, etc.*

Most parents are not aware of this danger. We need to spread the word.

I am worried about this not just for my own children, but for all children. And democracy.

Conclusion

The key take-away from this survey is that parents have strong opinions about public education which are formed in the context of their deep love for their children. For that reason alone, parents' opinions matter, and are worthy of being taken into serious consideration when decisions are being made that affect their children.

But PAA believes that too much of the current education policy making happens without any meaningful parent input, and often in complete opposition to what many parents want for their children. This is due in large part to the misguided directives of the Obama administration's education department, and to the arrogance of a handful of wealthy philanthropists who have had far too much influence on the direction of public schooling. Both have had the effect of moving important school decision making away from the local community where most parent participation happens, and into distant hands – with too many negative consequences.

PAA's role is to help promote an *informed* parent voice. We will take into account the results of this survey – the parent voices that it has gathered – as we continue to create informational materials, fact sheets and position papers that can be used in our advocacy work, and that more accurately reflect the concerns and hopes of parents whose input is too often neglected. Well-informed and well-supported parents are the best equipped to challenge threats to our children's educational opportunity, well-being and happiness. And when parents join together, we are definitely a force to be reckoned with

Methodology

We do not claim that our survey conforms to scientific research standards. PAA does not have a budget for such a costly, complex undertaking. What we do have is a small, dedicated group of members who created and analyzed the survey, and a large network of parents who widely distributed and promoted it. The survey was created by a small committee of PAA leaders. It was formatted in the Survey Monkey program. The link to the survey was then shared widely within PAA's networks and through social media. During the month the survey was “live” (June 29 – August 1) we collected responses from 584 people from more than 33 states.

Links to the charts reporting responses to our questions are below, however, our analysis is more focused on the written comments of the respondents. Additional commentary in the report provides background on why PAA was interested in the issues we included, and how we perceive the feedback we received.

Links for the charts for the demographic questions we asked are also below. Some key numbers: respondents were 68% current public school parents, 28% former public school parents, 80% white, and 83% female.

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A few closing comments:

My first choice of a school is one that is thoughtfully diverse, small, and makes decisions based on what is best for students informed by well done educational research.

Strong neighborhood schools are the backbone of stable neighborhoods and a strong economy!

Public Schools are the starting point of the most social good. A place to learn. To be cared for. To be accountable to one another. To help. To grow. To learn critical thinking. To build community. Next to public libraries and health care they can be used for the greatest good.

Chart Q 1 (How important) <http://parentsacrossamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Survey2017Q1chart.pdf>

Chart Q 2 (Give your opinion) <http://parentsacrossamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Survey2017Q2chart.pdf>

Chart Q 3 (Personalized learning) <http://parentsacrossamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Survey2017Q3chart.pdf>

Chart – male/female: <http://parentsacrossamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/PAA2017MF.pdf>

Chart – % public school parents: <http://parentsacrossamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Survey2017parent.pdf>

Chart – race/ethnicity/culture: <http://parentsacrossamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Survey2017demchart.pdf>