Introduction

Across the U.S., parents are worried about the lasting effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on their children and what it might mean for a new normal in K-12 education. Recent polls show that about two-thirds of parents (65%) are concerned about their children's academic progress, while over half of them (58%) are worried about their children's mental health and emotional well-being. Unfortunately, recent research confirms these fears are well founded. Parents are looking to policymakers and education leaders for solutions.

Parents' concerns have already prompted many to make a change to their children's education. Shifts in public and private sector enrollment reflect a higher level of student mobility, much of which is due to parents changing their child's school. Increased participation rates in options like home-schooling, learning pods, or tutoring also reflect a higher degree of parent agency in seeking alternative or supplemental learning opportunities for their children.

Those who have not made a change to their children's education, however, find themselves returning to schools and classrooms that look much like they did before the pandemic. These families include two groups: first, the majority of parents who are generally satisfied with their children's school, for whom the return to familiar educational experiences and routines may be a welcome respite from two years of disruption; and, second, those for whom the return to normal is a reminder of their frustrations with their children's education but who are struggling to determine whether and how to make a change (Table 1).

Policymakers and education leaders must do more to support this last group of parents — those who are dissatisfied and have not (yet) made a change to their children's schooling, but are looking for solutions.

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<th>TABLE 1. FOUR TYPES OF PARENTS, BASED ON SATISFACTION AND BEHAVIOR</th>
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<td>MOVING</td>
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Many Parents Are Dissatisfied, But for Different Reasons

Over the past two years, public opinion polling has provided some of the most timely and helpful insights into how education stakeholders have experienced the pandemic. Across polls and over time, between about 50% and 75% of parents report satisfaction with their children's education, leaving between 25% and 50% of parents who are ambivalent or dissatisfied.¹

Combined with parents' stated concerns for their children and many parents' demonstrated willingness to change their children's school or seek out other supports, polling data begs for a deeper analysis of the nature of parents' dissatisfaction and what they want for their kids' education moving into the 2022-23 school year and beyond. There is more going on under the surface with how parents feel about K-12 education than can be teased out with polling and enrollment data.

With this in mind, the Benenson Strategy Group conducted a series of online parent journals in February 2022 with 35 parents to provide a more nuanced view into parents' thoughts about K-12 education.² Only parents who reported at least some frustration or dissatisfaction with their children's school were included in the exercise. The number of participants and journals are insufficient to support definitive claims or broad generalizations about what frustrates parents or what they want. However, the journals elevate several themes, add nuance to parent perspectives, and suggest how policymakers and education leaders might respond.

The online journals surface frustrations such as how schools communicate with parents, how schools tailor support to meet students’ individual needs, and the availability of extracurricular activities.

“Often, we are left in the dark about what [children] are learning or even what assignments are being given.”
—MOM FROM UTAH

“I often advocate for my child to get the attention she needs when I should not have to because she should already be getting it.”
—MOM FROM ILLINOIS

“I get frustrated when I look into certain activities and they are available at other districts but not mine.”
—MOM FROM WISCONSIN

“All children are not the same. There should be a way to customize your child’s or the school’s curriculum for each specific child.”
—MOM FROM NORTH CAROLINA
Despite Dissatisfaction, Many Parents Also Express Uncertainty About Whether They Should or Could Make a Change

Among parents who are dissatisfied with their children’s education, some are on the fence about whether they should make a change. There are “switching costs” involved in any change: upending routines, starting new relationships with friends and teachers, and uncertainty about whether another option will, in fact, be better.

“There are a lot of factors that would make it difficult [to move] my child to a new school. One, it’s comfort for her, she knows her school, the people and teachers there. It’s stressful to start anew. And then there’s everything else — location could be a factor; costs could come into play. It’s a lot to think about.”
—MOM FROM NEVADA

“I moved schools when I was younger and know how difficult it can be to start over with everything (new friends, new environment). I think having to put my child through this, especially when they have established themselves and have an established group of friends, would be difficult.”
—DAD FROM PENNSYLVANIA

“There is always the fear in a child going to a new school: the unknown, new friends, new building, etc.”
—DAD FROM NEW YORK
Other dissatisfied families may not have enough information about different options or aren’t confident those options will be better than their children’s current situation.

“Yes, I do [have the ability to make changes], but I need more support and guidance in figuring out what those things are or can be.”
—DAD FROM ILLINOIS

“I have not considered enrolling my child in another school. If I knew that my child could attend a better school and [that it] was affordable and much better, then I would consider it.”
—DAD FROM ILLINOIS

“I haven’t really considered any other form of schooling other than public school. Really, it’s all we know, and I know ... private costs money. I don’t know about online learning, either.”
—MOM FROM NEVADA

Still other dissatisfied families may want to make a change and know what they want for their children but face significant barriers to accessing it.

“We’ve considered a private school, but that comes with a cost. We also have considered a parochial school. ... Either a private school or a parochial school offer much better benefits than a public school. It’s just a matter of making it happen, which for us, is depending on a pending move [to a different state].”
—DAD FROM CALIFORNIA

“I can’t really change anything unless I took her out of public school and into something else. But that costs money.”
—MOM FROM NEVADA

“If money wasn’t an issue, I’d hire private tutors or put her in a private school.”
—DAD FROM NEW YORK
More Must Be Done to Help Parents Get Their Children What They Need

There is a significant opportunity to better serve families by taking time to listen and respond to what they want; policymakers and education leaders may be able to address parents’ frustration and mitigate their desire to make a change at all. Policymakers and education leaders can also do more to increase access to schools of choice or supplemental learning opportunities that do not require students to change schools. Some parents may need more information and support to understand what options are available and feel confident that those options are worth the risks and costs. Still others need help overcoming the barriers to access, whether they be financial, logistical, or otherwise. Policymakers and education leaders must:

1. Work with parents to better understand their needs.

Policymakers and education leaders must step up their efforts to reach out and listen to what parents and families need. Part of this outreach includes making sure the information parents share is heard, valued, and put to use.

- **Elevating parent voices**: National Parents Union (NPU) is a network of parent organizations that elevates parent voices to influence policies and practices at the local, state, and national levels. Among other supports for parents, NPU provides guidance and resources for how parents can engage school administrators and elected officials to have their perspectives heard.\(^{10}\)

- **Authentic engagement with families**: Learning Heroes provides examples of family engagement strategies that school and district leaders can use to build trust, enhance student learning and well-being, and have institutional support.\(^{11}\)

- **Listening tours**: Leadership for Educational Equity provides elected officials with a “how-to” guide for building relationships and dialogue with constituents, to better understand their needs and reflect them back to the community.\(^{12}\)
2. Increase the number of educational options available to families.

The complexity and scale of educational challenges in a post-pandemic environment will require an abundance of options to help children and families. This includes providing families with educational options both during and beyond the regular school day. In addition to school choice, flexible learning options, such as after-school programs and summer activities, are likely to be in high demand in the coming years and can provide valuable benefits for parents and students. Policymakers can increase the number of educational options in several ways, including by supporting flexible funding mechanisms, such as microgrants; establishing or expanding supplemental supports; and enabling students to earn academic credit for out-of-school learning.13

- **Microgrants**: In Idaho, the Empowering Parents Grants program provides up to $3,000 per family for certain educational purchases, including technology and tutoring services.14

- **Supplemental tutoring**: In Texas, students who do not score proficient or above on state assessments are eligible for accelerated instruction strategies, which may include 30 hours or more of tutoring; state statute requires that tutoring be in addition to regular grade-level instruction and take place in groups of no more than three students.15

- **Out-of-school learning**: In New Hampshire, students may receive course credit toward graduation for participation in approved alternative programs where learning takes place outside of school, such as participating in a performing arts program.16

3. Inform families about educational options that could meet their children’s needs.

Before families can make a change in their children's education, they need to be aware of the options that are not only available for their children but could also serve their needs well. Policymakers and advocates must increase their efforts to provide families with clear and reliable information to better inform their educational decision-making.

- **Coaching and support**: A nonprofit called RESCHOOL Colorado connects families with learner advocates who help match learning goals and interests with educational resources and opportunities.17 Similarly, EdNavigator partners with schools and employers to help parents find the schools that will best support their children's success.18

- **Transparent information**: To facilitate open enrollment, Tennessee law requires districts to identify schools with available space at the grade, class, and program level, and make that information public at least two weeks before the start of the open enrollment period.19 Websites that aggregate and list school options, like GreatSchools, also help parents learn about educational opportunities in their area.20

- **Support to access funding**: The Indiana Education Scholarship Account Program is developing a portal for parents and providers that not only aggregates information about available options but also helps families access and manage individualized spending accounts.21
4. Reduce barriers to access.

Even when families know of educational options that could serve their children well and are ready to make a change, barriers beyond financial resources can stand in their way. These can range from complex application processes to limited transportation and access to high-speed internet. Policymakers should work with parents to identify the most significant barriers to educational opportunities in their communities and tailor solutions to mitigate or eliminate them.

- **Grants for innovation in transportation:** A for Arizona is administering Arizona’s Transportation Modernization Grant Program to identify solutions to transportation problems at the local level, such as assisting families with transportation costs, high-efficiency vehicles, using technology to create more efficient routes, and micro-transit initiatives.

- **Flexibility in transportation:** Georgia is expanding transportation options by permitting local school boards to use vehicles other than buses for transporting students.

- **Improving broadband access:** EducationSuperHighway works to bridge the broadband access and affordability gap, including facilitating partnerships with internet service providers to identify students who lack broadband in their homes.

**KEY TAKEAWAY**

Policymakers and school and system leaders should support parents along all four fronts: understanding parent needs and preferences, fostering a greater supply of options, providing better information, and reducing barriers to access. These efforts could look different in different states and communities based on the needs of families and political realities, but the focus must be on ensuring that parents who are concerned about their children and frustrated by their children's education are able to find solutions that work for them.
Endnotes


8 Ibid.

9 All parent quotes are drawn from the Benenson Strategy Group online parent journals.


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