



The Associated Press-NORC
Center for Public Affairs Research

EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES: CHOICE, CONTROL, AND QUALITY

Although many Americans profess to want more school choice, there is very little support for several proposals to provide options in elementary and secondary education.

In the latest poll conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, about 4 in 10 think there is too little school choice in their state or their own community. However, more Americans want to maintain the status quo that gives preference to the children living near a particular school than support proposals to provide more choice like using various criteria for admission or the use of lotteries to determine school admissions.

Fewer than half of all Americans want to increase the number of charter schools or school voucher programs that provide government funding for students to attend private or religious schools instead of their public school. However, among those who say parents have too little choice in where their children are educated in their community, about 6 in 10 would like to see more charter schools and school voucher programs.

Overall, 70 percent of Americans think their local schools educate minority children just as well as white children. Eighty-one percent of whites with school-age children say white children receive just about the same quality of education as African-American, Hispanic, and other minority children. Non-white parents are not quite as favorable: 58 percent say minority children's education is equal to white children, but 39 percent consider it inferior.

The nationwide poll was conducted April 20-23, 2017, using the AmeriSpeak Panel, the probability-based panel of NORC at the University of Chicago. Online and telephone interviews using landlines and cell phones were conducted with 1,036 adults. The margin of sampling error is plus or minus 4 percentage points.



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Three Things You Should Know About The AP-NORC Poll on Education Among all Americans:

1. **Four in 10** say parents in the United States have too little choice when it comes to their children's education, and less than 10 percent think they have too many alternatives. Nearly half say the amount of school choice parents have is about right.
2. Who should control education? **16 percent** say the federal government; **47 percent** the states; and, **36 percent** local communities.
3. Most are unfamiliar with charter schools or school voucher programs, but, once defined, **7 in 10** say both should be held to the same standards as traditional public schools.

After the poll was concluded, President Donald Trump ordered a review of federal education policies in an effort to strengthen local control of public schools. While most Americans disapprove of Trump's handling of education, they agree that state and local government should play the largest role in public school education. Nearly half, 47 percent, say individual states should control their public schools, and 36 percent think local communities should determine how public schools are run. Only 16 percent say the federal government should have the largest role in running public schools.

Key findings from the poll include:

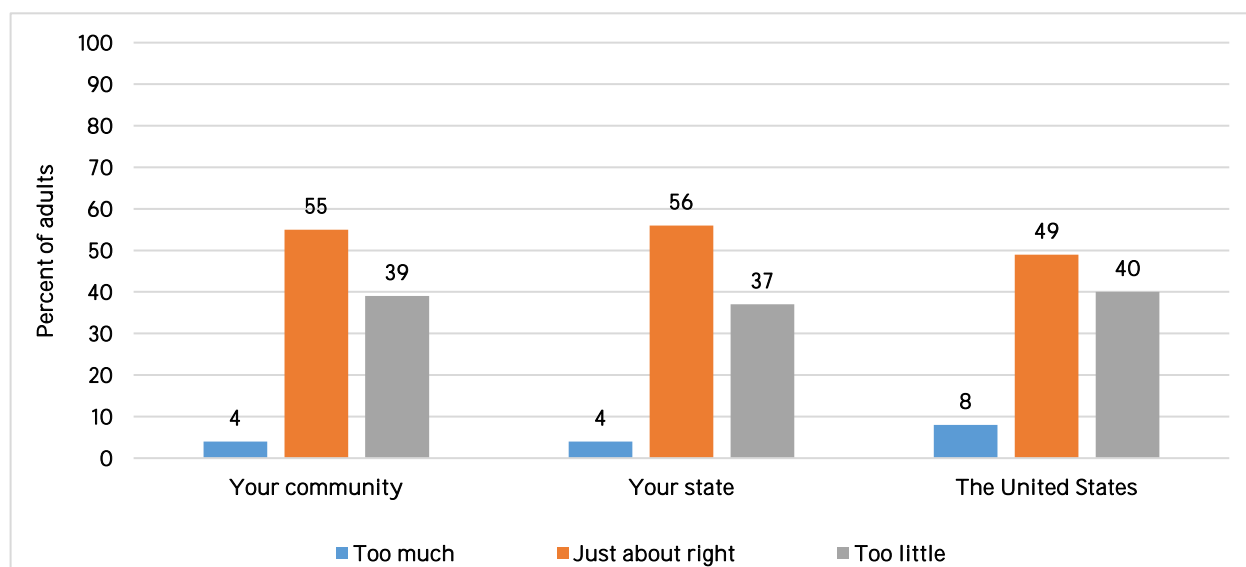
- About 55 percent say parents in their state and locally have the right amount of alternatives in deciding which school their children attend, but nearly 4 in 10 say parents have too little choice. Only 4 percent think parents have too much choice in their state or local community when it comes to where their children will be educated.
- A third of Americans regard the quality of charter schools—both in their own community and nationally—as excellent or good, and less than 10 percent consider them to be substandard. However, about a third of Americans were unable to give an assessment, and 6 in 10 have heard little or nothing about charter schools.
- Nearly half, 47 percent, favor more charter schools, defined in the survey as “public schools that function independently of local school district control,” and 23 percent oppose. Thirty percent neither favor nor oppose. Among those who consider the amount of school choice available in their community for parents insufficient, about 6 in 10 support additional charter schools.
- The public is even less familiar with school voucher programs. Two-thirds of the public have heard little or nothing about school vouchers. Forty-three percent favor the idea of giving low-income parents tax-funded vouchers they can use to help pay for tuition for their children to attend private or religious schools of their choice, and 35 percent oppose. Twenty-one percent are ambivalent about the idea. But, about 6 in 10 of those who say parents have too little school choice in their community favor voucher programs.
- Seven in 10 Americans say charter schools and private schools that receive tax-funded vouchers should be held to the same standards as other schools, rather than setting their own standards.
- In general, only 26 percent of Americans consider the nation's public schools to be excellent or good. Typically, the public has a better impression when they have some first-hand knowledge, and so 45 percent regard the quality of education at their local schools to be excellent or good. And 52 percent of people whose children actually attend public school say the quality of education at their local public schools is excellent or good.
- Parents are more positive about the school they know best, but still a third of parents are not particularly enthusiastic about the quality of their child's education. Although 67 percent say the quality of their child's school is excellent or good, 27 percent describe the education their child receives as fair, and 5 percent say the quality of their child's school is poor.
- Beyond the overall quality of schools, Americans don't give particularly high marks for the job that is done in preparing students for life after high school. Only about a third say students are well prepared to join the workforce or be good citizens. About 4 in 10 say their local schools do an excellent or good job of college preparation.

PROPOSALS TO INCREASE SCHOOL CHOICE HAVE LITTLE SUPPORT AMONG AMERICANS.

While many Americans say parents don't have the right amount of choice in where their children attend school, few support solutions that would create more options. Nationally, 49 percent of Americans say parents currently have just about the right amount of choice in deciding where their children should attend school, but 40 percent say parents have too little choice. Only 8 percent say parents have too much choice.

When asked about school choice in their state and community, nearly 4 in 10 Americans say parents don't have enough say in where their children should attend school.

Many say parents have too little choice in where their children attend school.



Question: Would you say parents in [your community/your state/The United States] currently have too much, too little, or just about the right amount of choice when deciding where their children should attend school?

Though many Americans feel that parents have too little choice in where to send their children to school, solutions that would give more choice to parents are not popular. Instead, there is more support for keeping children in their own neighborhood, and few back the idea of using various criteria for admission or lotteries to determine school admissions.

Sixty-seven percent of Americans say preference should be given to children living in a school's catchment, with children living outside that area given a lower chance of admission. Just 23 percent approve of schools using academic accomplishment, specific talents, or any other prerequisites to govern admission. And merely 8 percent support the idea of lotteries to place children in schools that are not necessarily their local school.

Whites are more likely than African Americans or Hispanics to support the option that gives preference to children living within school boundaries (76 percent vs. 44 percent and 56 percent, respectively), while African Americans and Hispanics are more likely than whites to prefer a system based on a specific set of criteria (37 percent and 29 percent vs. 17 percent, respectively). There are no differences based on race or ethnicity when it comes to school lotteries.

Younger adults are less likely than older cohorts to say they support the system that gives preference to children living within the school's boundaries (54 percent of 18-29 year olds vs. 74 percent of 45-59 year olds and 73 percent of adults age 60 and older). They are also three times as likely to support school lotteries (15 percent of 18-29 year olds vs. 4 percent of 45-59 year olds and 5 percent of adults age 60 and older).

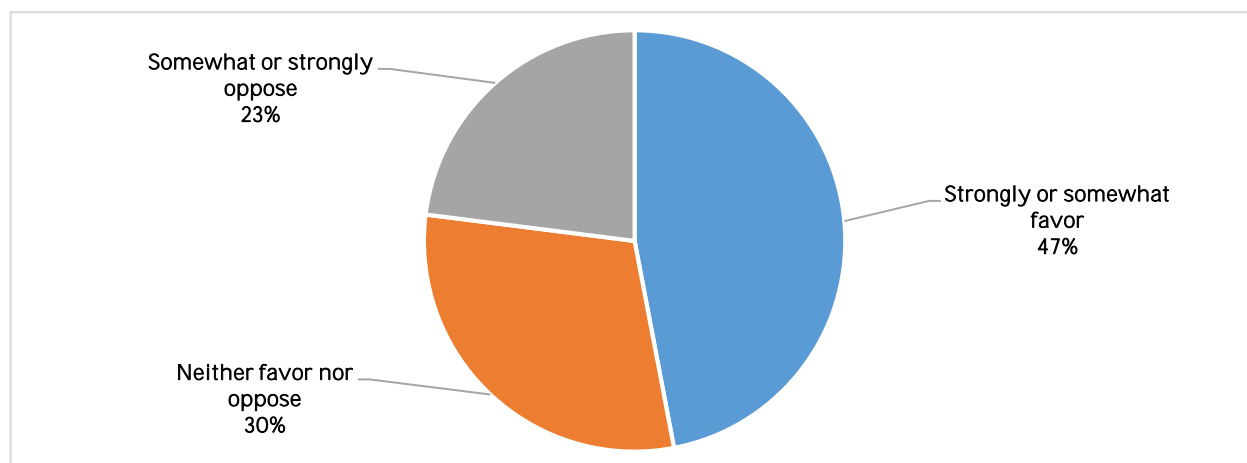
THERE IS TENTATIVE SUPPORT FOR INCREASING CHARTER SCHOOLS.

Though the number of charter schools operating in America is on the rise, most Americans have heard little about them. Charter schools educate more than 2.5 million children in the United States each year.¹ Nationally, about 7 percent of all public schools are charters, a figure that has more than doubled since 2003.² Yet 58 percent of all Americans, and 66 percent of parents with a child enrolled in a traditional public school, have heard little or nothing about charter schools.

Thirty-four percent regard the quality of charter schools—both in their own community and nationally—as excellent or good, and fewer than 10 percent consider them to be substandard. Another 34 percent say they don't know enough about local charter schools or charter schools nationally to say.

After being informed that charter schools are public schools that function independently of the local school district control as long as they maintain certain standards set by the state government, 47 percent of the public and 49 percent of public school parents favor opening additional charter schools. Only 23 percent of all Americans and 18 percent of public school parents oppose increasing the number of charter schools. Three in 10 have no opinion either way.

Nearly half of Americans support the expansion of charter schools.



Question: Would you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose opening more public charter schools, that is, public schools that function independently of local school district control as long as they maintain certain standards set by the state government?

Republicans are more likely than Democrats to support the opening of more charter schools in the United States (53 percent vs. 42 percent). Hispanics are more likely than whites to support increasing the number of charter schools (59 percent vs. 46 percent).

¹ <http://dashboard2.publiccharters.org/National/>

² <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=30>

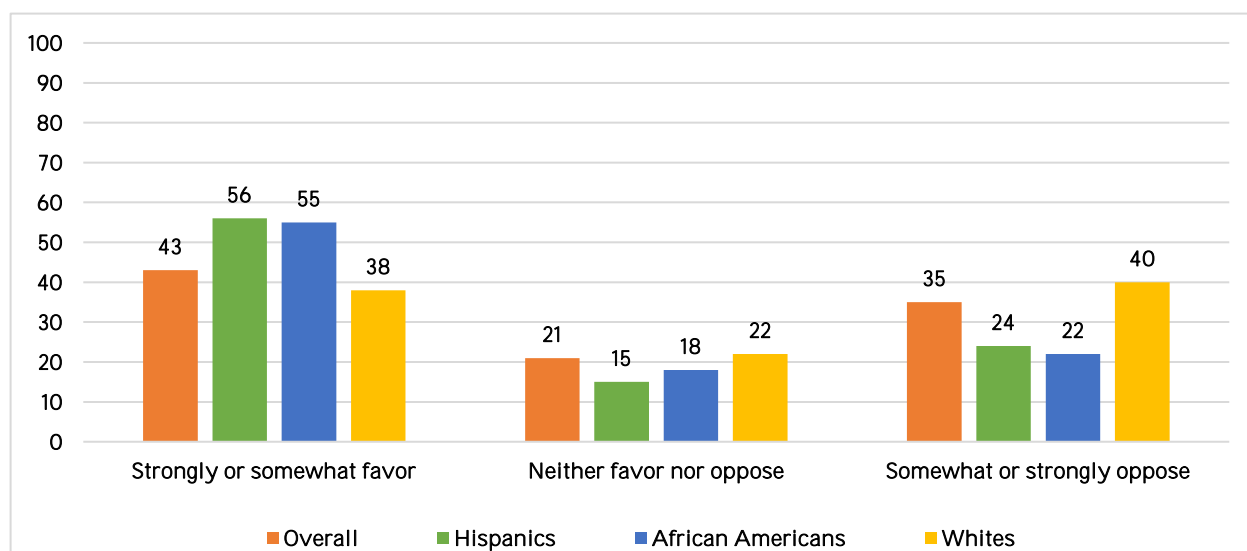
The public does want charter schools held to the same standards as other schools. Sixty-nine percent think charter schools should be required to meet the same educational criteria as other public schools, while only 29 percent say they should be able to set their own standards. Those who oppose opening more charters, Democrats, older Americans, and whites are all more likely than others to think charters should be held to the same educational standards as traditional public schools.

AMERICANS ARE SPLIT OVER THE CONCEPT OF SCHOOL VOUCHERS.

The public is even less familiar with school voucher programs. Today, there are 25 voucher programs that operate in 14 states and the District of Columbia.³ Two-thirds of the public and three-fourths of parents of school-age children have heard little or nothing about school vouchers. And 69 percent of those living in states that have voucher programs are not familiar with these types of programs.

When asked for their opinion of giving low-income parents tax-funded vouchers they can use to help pay for tuition for their children to attend private or religious schools of their choice, 43 percent favor the idea and 35 percent oppose. Hispanics and African Americans are more likely than whites to support voucher programs.

Minorities are more likely than whites to favor school voucher programs.



Question: Would you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose giving low-income parents tax-funded vouchers they can use to help pay for tuition for their children to attend private or religious schools of their choice instead of public schools?

Among those who initially favor vouchers for school choice, nearly half changed their mind when given an argument against school vouchers. Twenty-nine percent oppose vouchers if it means that public schools would receive less funding, and 19 percent became ambivalent about the idea.

But only about a quarter of people who opposed school vouchers changed their opinion after hearing a reason in favor of the program. Thirteen percent say they favor the program after being told that without vouchers children from less affluent families would not be able to attend non-public schools of their choice. Another 13 percent said they neither favor nor oppose vouchers after hearing that argument.

³ <https://www.edchoice.org/resource-hub/fast-facts/>

Support for school vouchers decreases with argument against them.

Opinion of giving low-income parents tax-funded vouchers to help pay tuition at private and religious schools	Percent of adults (%)
Favor school vouchers	43
<i>What if public schools would receive less money?</i>	
Still favor	22
Neither favor nor oppose	8
Now oppose	13
Neither favor nor oppose school vouchers	21
Oppose school vouchers	35
<i>What if less well-off children don't have enough school choice?</i>	
Still oppose	26
Neither favor nor oppose	5
Now favor	4

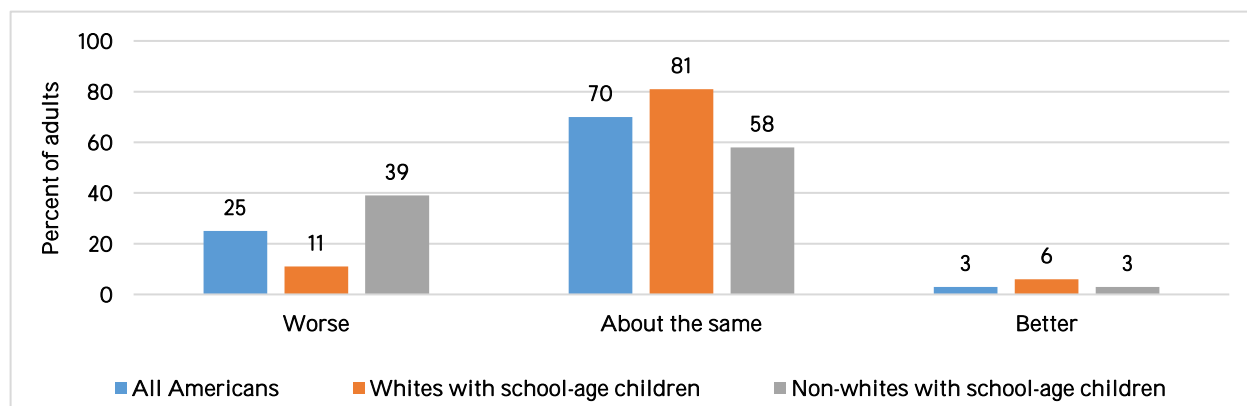
Like charter schools, private schools that receive tax-funded vouchers need to maintain the same standards as public schools, according to 70 percent of Americans. Twenty-seven percent say they should be allowed to set their own educational standards. Democrats, older Americans, and those who have higher incomes are all more likely than others to think schools that receive vouchers should be held to the same educational standards as public schools.

MOST SAY MINORITY STUDENTS FARE AS WELL IN LOCAL SCHOOLS AS WHITE PEERS.

Seven in 10 Americans think African-American, Latino, and other minority children get as good an education as the white children in their community, 25 percent say they get a worse education, and 3 percent say they get a better education.

However, while 81 percent of whites with school-age children say their children receive just about the same quality of education as African-American, Hispanic, and other minority children, non-white parents are not as positive.

Minorities see less equity in education than their white counterparts.

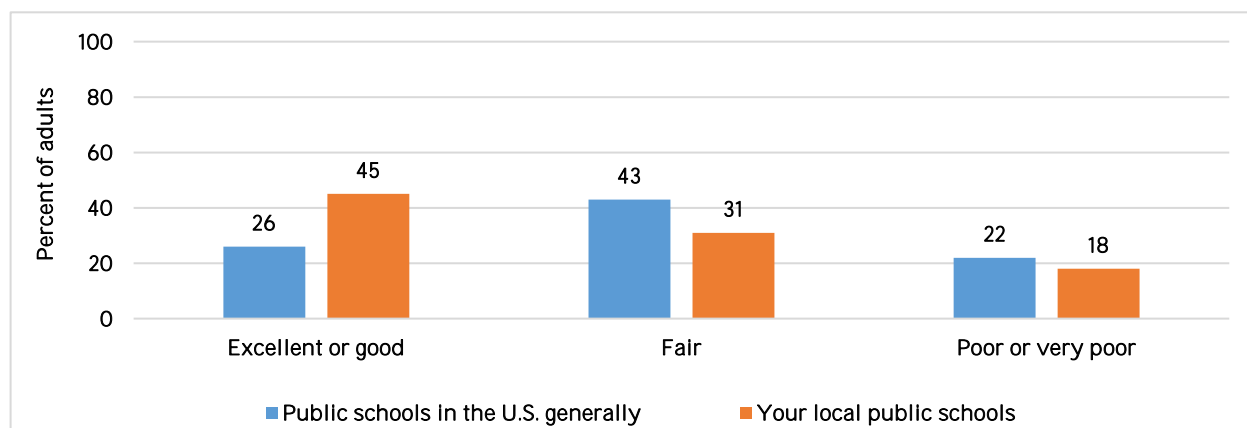


Question: In general, do you think African-American, Latino, and other minority children get a better education than white children in your community, a worse education, or is it about the same?

FEW GIVE PUBLIC SCHOOLS HIGH MARKS FOR QUALITY, AND FUNDING IS NOT SEEN AS A SOLUTION.

Only a quarter of Americans consider the nation’s public schools to be excellent or good, while 43 percent say they are fair and 22 percent say they are poor or very poor. The public is somewhat more positive about their own community’s schools, with 45 percent saying their local public schools are excellent or good.

Few are positive about public education, though more say their neighborhood schools are good.

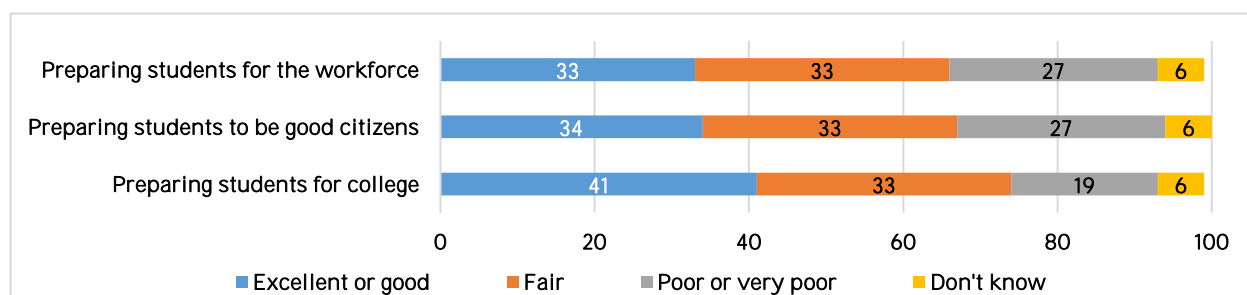


Question: How would you rate the quality of education in...?

Parents with children who currently attend public school are less likely than Americans in general to assess their local public schools as poor (10 percent vs. 22 percent), but they express similar views on public schools in the broader United States. Parents give high marks to the schools their own children attend. Among all parents of school-age children, 67 percent say their child’s school is excellent or good, while 27 percent describe their child’s school as fair and 5 percent say the quality of their child’s school is poor or very poor. This assessment does not vary by race, income, or urbanicity.

Few Americans say their local public schools are doing a good job in preparing students for the future. Just one-third say their neighborhood schools are doing a good or excellent job in preparing students to be good citizens or preparing students for the workforce. Slightly more say their schools are doing a good or excellent job in preparing students for college.

Few think public schools are doing a good job preparing students for adulthood.



Question: How good a job do your local public schools do in...?

Parents with children who attend public school and Americans in general give a similarly tepid assessment regarding their local public schools' performance on some specific areas.

Additional financial support for local public schools is not seen as particularly beneficial in improving education. While 34 percent are confident that increased funding would improve the public schools in their community, another 38 percent are only somewhat confident, and 27 percent are not convinced that more money would improve their schools. Views on additional funding fall along party lines; Democrats (44 percent) are more likely than independents (30 percent) and Republicans (24 percent) to say an increase of funding will improve their local public schools.

Approximately 1 in 4 schools in the United States are private schools,⁴ and an estimated 5.3 million children in the country attend private schools.⁵ Americans tend to regard private schools as being of a superior quality—59 percent say their local private schools are excellent or good, and 55 percent say the same about the nation's private schools in general. Even among public school parents, 54 percent consider their local private schools as excellent or good, and 52 percent say the same about private schools throughout the country.

MOST DISAPPROVE OF TRUMP'S HANDLING OF EDUCATION BUT AGREE ON MORE LOCAL CONTROL.

Fifty-eight percent of Americans disapprove of Trump's handling of education, and 40 percent approve. The president's job performance is typically viewed through a partisan lens, and assessment of how Trump is handling education in this country is no different. Seventy-seven percent of Republicans like what Trump has been doing with education, while 89 percent of Democrats disapprove. Independents are closely divided: 46 percent approve and 50 percent disapprove.

The poll was completed before Trump ordered a review of federal education policies in an effort to strengthen local control of public schools.

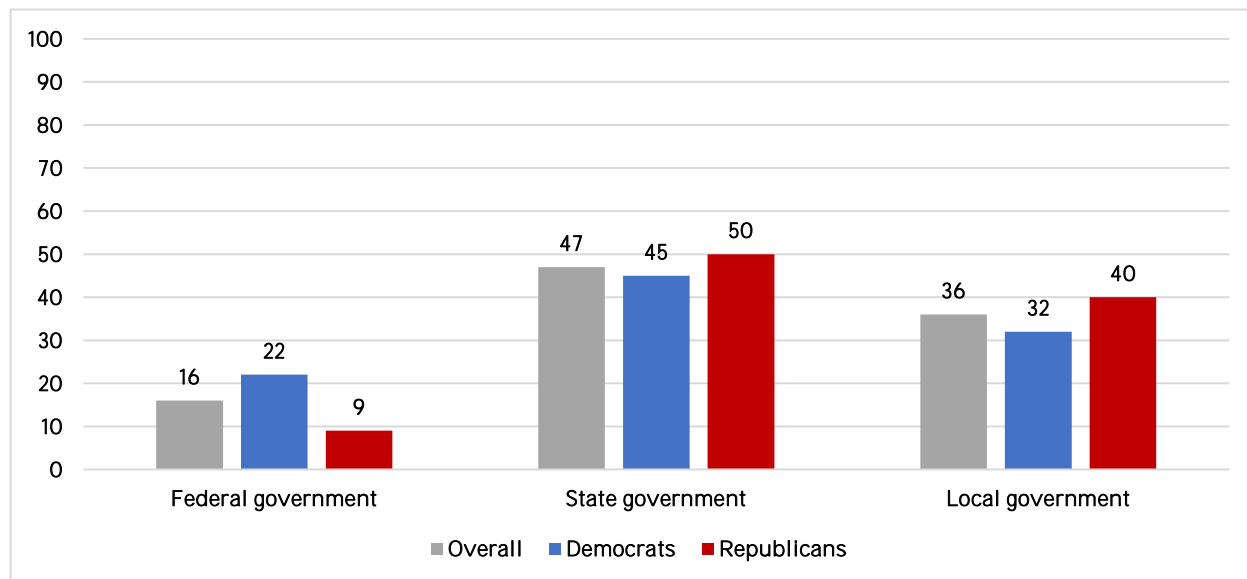
The public agrees. Only 16 percent say the federal government should have the largest role in deciding how public schools in the United States function, including 9 percent of Republicans, 13 percent of independents, and 22 percent of Democrats.

However, regardless of party identification, nearly half of Americans say the state government should play the largest role in determining public education, and 36 percent say individual municipalities should be the principal authority for public schools.

⁴ <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=84>

⁵ <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=65>

Both Democrats and Republicans say education should fall under state or local jurisdiction.



Question: Which level of government should have the largest role in deciding how public schools are run?

ABOUT THE STUDY

Survey Methodology

This survey was conducted by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and with funding from NORC at the University of Chicago. Data were collected using the AmeriSpeak Omnibus®, a monthly multi-client survey using NORC's probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. household population. The survey was part of a larger study that included questions about other topics not included in this report. During the initial recruitment phase of the panel, randomly selected U.S. households were sampled with a known, non-zero probability of selection from the NORC National Sample Frame and then contacted by U.S. mail, email, telephone, and field interviewers (face-to-face). The panel provides sample coverage of approximately 97% of the U.S. household population. Those excluded from the sample include people with P.O. Box only addresses, some addresses not listed in the USPS Delivery Sequence File, and some newly constructed dwellings.

Interviews for this survey were conducted between April 20 and 23, 2017, with adults age 18 and over representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia. All interviews were conducted in English by professional interviewers who were carefully trained on the specific survey for this study. Panel members were randomly drawn from AmeriSpeak, and 1,036 completed the survey—852 via the web and 184 via telephone. The final stage completion rate is 30.6 percent, the weighted household panel response rate is 34.4 percent, and the weighted household panel retention rate is 94.7 percent, for a cumulative response rate of 10.0 percent. The overall margin of sampling error is +/- 4.0 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of sampling error may be higher for subgroups.

Once the sample has been selected and fielded, and all the study data have been collected and made final, a poststratification process is used to adjust for any survey nonresponse as well as any non-coverage or under- and oversampling resulting from the study specific sample design. Poststratification variables included age, gender, census division, race/ethnicity, and education. Weighting variables were obtained from the 2016 Current Population Survey. The weighted data, which reflect the U.S. population of adults age 18 and over, were used for all analyses.

All differences reported between subgroups of the U.S. population are at the 95 percent level of statistical significance, meaning that there is only a 5 percent (or lower) probability that the observed differences could be attributed to chance variation in sampling.

A comprehensive listing of the questions, complete with tabulations of top-level results for each question, is available on The AP-NORC Center website: www.apnorc.org. For more information, email info@apnorc.org.

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