

Making the Case for a Bold Education Agenda in Blue States

A Messaging Guide for Advocates

Over the past year, the coronavirus pandemic has shone a spotlight on the systemic problems in public schools and called out the crucial need to address these major challenges, especially when it comes to providing an equitable education to every student.

The American Rescue Plan—with its nearly \$1.9 trillion in stimulus and an astounding \$123 billion allocated to education, in addition to billions more from the previous rescue packages—is an unprecedented response to the problems the country is facing and a reflection of the consensus that big, bold action is needed to move forward from the pandemic. State and local education agencies and organizations have a critical responsibility to make sure this stimulus money not only addresses today's biggest problems—from safe school re-openings to addressing learning loss—but also offers a unique opportunity to redefine the future of education.

As plans for the money are developed and put into action, advocates must connect their spending priorities to a bigger vision for transforming education. To effectively appeal to Democratic voters and parents—and through them, to blue-state legislators and education policymakers—advocates need to understand **five key insights about their mindset**. Democratic voters and parents believe:

1. It's time to rethink and reimagine our education system, with big, transformative action in schools.
2. There's a wide range of changes that would be effective in helping students, meaning that transformative action can take different forms in different places.
3. Money is essential, but money alone is not enough to fix the problems in schools.
4. The focus should always be on the needs of students.
5. Families deserve to know how money is being used and the impact it's having.

This mindset among Democratic voters and parents leads to a clear set of **messaging principles** for making the case for action in blue states:

1. Speak to the pain points.
2. Establish a bold vision.
3. Focus on who benefits.

The bottom-line message here is simple: policymakers should embrace need big, bold, student-centered change, not just a return to what we've always done.

Unless otherwise noted, the insights and messaging recommendations in this guide for advocates are drawn from a nationwide poll of 2,700 K-12 parents conducted in April 2021¹. This research paints a consistent picture: everyone involved in the education system recognizes the need for change in this moment. The challenge now is to seize this unique opportunity rather than return to the status quo.

¹ Walton Family Foundation and Beacon Research + Shawn & Company, "A National Survey of Parents for the Walton Family Foundation," April 2021. Accessed from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1j3bOX4IZzPNpn9Zc7r8FeVWtCDvzyuk9/view>

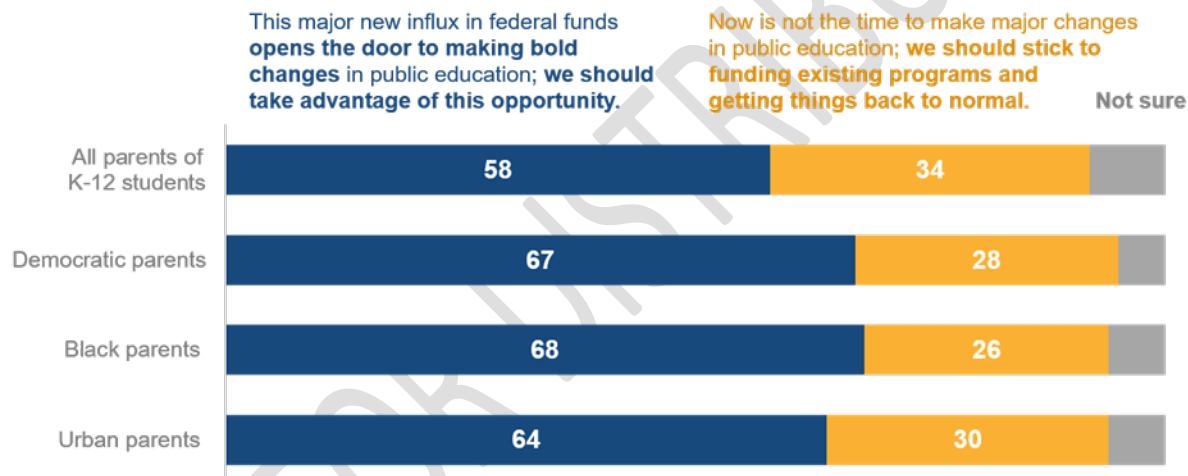
Framing the Democratic mindset

1) *It's time to rethink and reimagine our education system, with big, transformative action in schools.*

The coronavirus pandemic has completely disrupted the way children are educated, and parents are eager for big changes in schools. The desire for big changes to reimagine education is not new, but it has grown stronger as more parents have gotten an up-close view of their kids' education and learning amid widespread remote instruction.

When presented with a choice, more than two-thirds of Democratic parents and Black parents said they want to take advantage of new federal funds to make bold changes in public education, not just stick to funding existing programs. And while this sentiment is stronger among Democratic parents, it crosses party lines—58% of parents overall feel the same way, including a plurality of Republican parents. Investments, advocacy programs, and policy priorities in education must meet this moment and deliver on people's desire for big ideas and action.

Which of these two viewpoints are you more inclined to agree with?



This desire for big change rather than a return to normal reflects parents' concern about how their own kids have been impacted by the pandemic this year. 67% of parents say they are concerned that their children have not been making as much progress as they would in a typical year, including 39% who are very concerned. Among Democratic parents, there is even more alarm about the impact on their kids' learning this year, with 74% saying they are concerned (45% very concerned).

Parents are looking for major action at both the systemic level and the individual level, and state and local leaders need to account for this mindset when making decisions about the federal stimulus money.

2) *There's a wide range of changes that would be effective in helping students, meaning that transformative action can take different forms in different places.*

When it comes to spending federal funding on education, there isn't one right policy or set of programs to drive. Instead, Democratic parents define big, transformative action in many ways, giving advocates permission to push for many different kinds of investments and improvements in schools if they are connected to a big vision for what education should look like. From emotional and mental health support, to expanding broadband access, intensive tutoring programs, to providing direct financial support to meet students' individual needs, Democratic parents see any single investment as uniquely needed—they believe there are many effective uses for federal funding.

It would be a mistake to think small and let money go toward simply getting back to the status quo. When talking about programs and using this funding, make sure to connect back to the bigger goal of transformative change.

Parent Priorities: % Total Effective in Helping Students	Democratic Parents	Black Parents
Providing special funding for students with greater learning needs, like students with disabilities or students living in poverty	84	85
Providing tools, training and support so schools can best meet the emotional and mental health needs of students	83	83
Providing teachers with better instructional materials, including digital resources, that are aligned to state learning standards	83	84
Expanding broadband access to underserved areas and upgrade technology	83	83
Offering more opportunities for students to earn college credits while in high school or participate in work-based learning programs or apprenticeships in various career fields	82	86
Developing innovative assessments and other tools that can help teachers and schools better understand student academic and mental health needs	81	82
Creating more pathways into teaching to draw a more diverse and skilled teacher workforce	79	76
Expanding high-quality tutoring programs	79	79
Improving online learning by providing teachers with more training	79	83
Expanding free pre-K and childcare options for all children	78	82
Offering summer school instruction to any child who wants it	74	74
Providing direct grants to parents of \$500 per child for personal educational needs	73	71
Creating more school options, like charter schools or learning pods, so that families can choose the school that best meets their child's unique needs	71	71
Expand learning time through a longer school day or longer school year	58	49

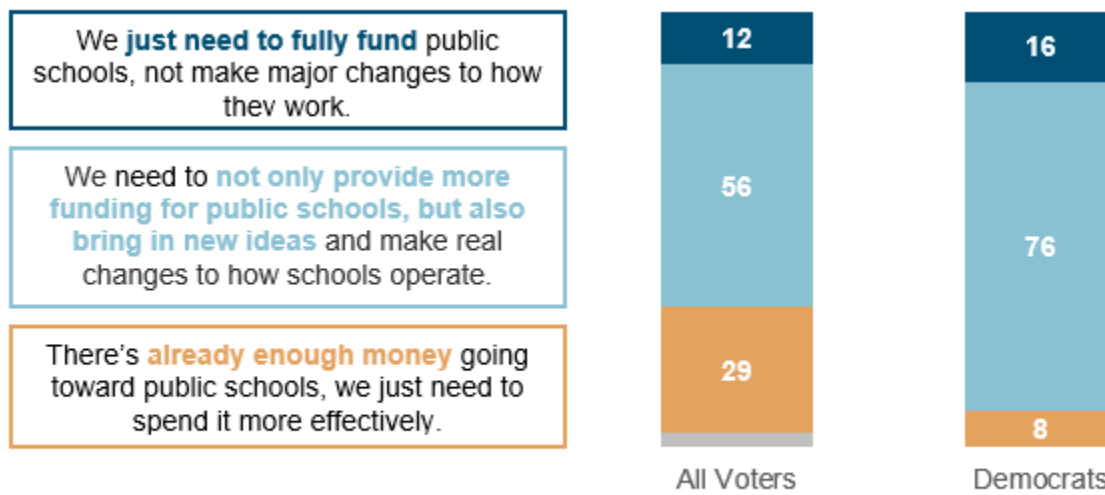
3) *Money is essential, but money alone is not enough to fix the problems in schools.*

Securing more funding, and more equitable funding, is unequivocally a top priority for Democrats. They see persistent underfunding of schools as part of a broader neglect of the public-school system, and when they see major investments in education (like this infusion of stimulus funding), it shows them that elected leaders genuinely share their outrage over that neglect—and their passion for improving schools.

This sentiment is reflected in Democratic parents' enthusiastic reception of the federal stimulus. 69% of Democratic parents said the \$190 billion in new federal aid for education is an appropriate amount and just 5% said it was too much, compared to 55% who said it was appropriate and 12% who said it was too much among parents overall.

But Democratic voters and parents also recognize that throwing money at complex problems that have persisted for decades isn't good enough. Even before the pandemic, polling showed that large majorities of Democrats believed that fixing the problems in schools and giving children the education they deserve would require new ideas and real change—not *just* more money.

Which comes closer to your view about how to improve America's public schools?²



Democrats for Education Reform, 2018

Now, with billions of dollars on the table and a deadline to spend it, there is no excuse. This is an opportunity to talk about big changes that can improve schools before the window closes and people once again get stuck in funding debates.

² Democrats for Education Reform and Benenson Strategy Group, "National Education Polling Results," August 2018. Accessed from <https://dfer.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/DFER-Benenson-Interested-Parties-Memo-FIN.pdf>

4) *The focus should always be on the needs of students.*

The principle that every student—no matter who they are, where they come from, or what they look like—deserves the chance for a great education remains at the core of Democrats' education values.

To connect with that mindset, messaging from advocates should keep the needs of students front and center. Don't talk about systems and funding formulae; talk about what children need to give them a fair chance for a great education. This creates a strong, effective messaging contrast between advocates talking about the individual needs of students and defenders of the status quo who would prefer to keep funding the same things as always.

And the resources provided by the American Rescue Plan provide an enormous opportunity to take action that directly addresses these needs, at a time when parents and teachers are *especially* concerned that students are falling behind. Research released by the National Parents Union in February³ showed that 61% of parents are worried about the possibility that students will fall behind academically without in-person instruction, up 13 points from July 2020 when 48% of parents felt this way.

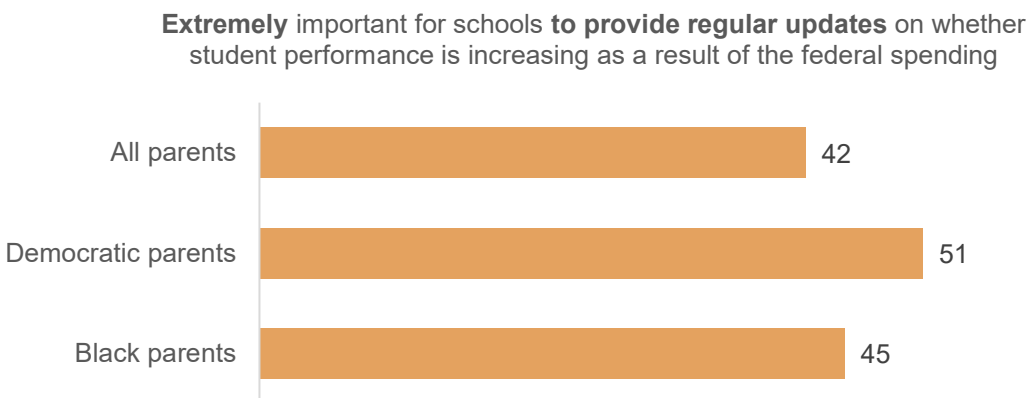
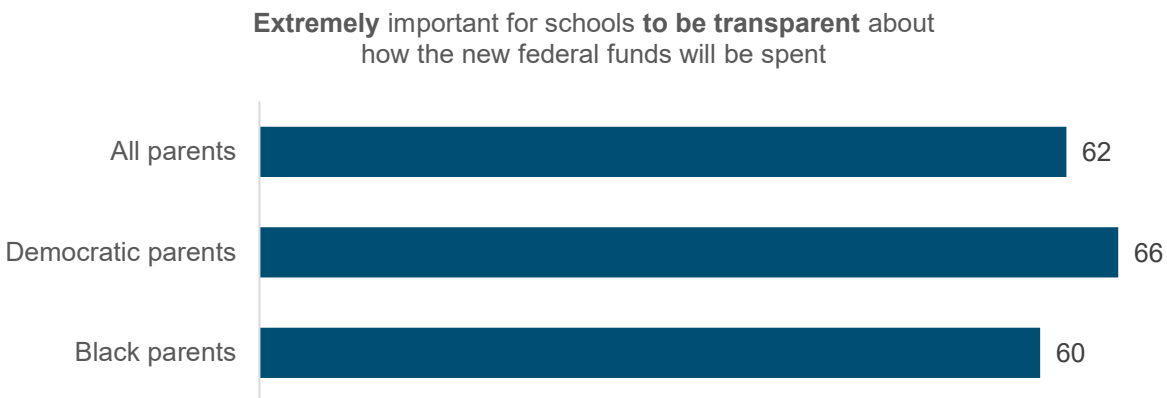
Getting beneath their high-level mindset, the importance of students' direct needs is also reflected in parents' level of interest in personally taking advantage of programs that could be offered or expanded through the stimulus:

- 88% of parents say they would definitely or possibly use (51% *definitely* use) high-quality tutoring services if they were offered at their children's school for free—including 93% of Democratic parents (60% *definitely*).
- 66% of parents say it would be extremely or very helpful for their own children's academic success if they were given a one-time grant of \$500 per child for educational needs—including 75% of Democratic parents.
- 50% of parents say they wish that schools in their community would offer more opportunities for high-school students to earn college credits or participate in work-based learning or apprenticeships—including 49% of Democratic parents.
- 44% of parents say they could use better computers, wifi, or other technology to better meet their children's educational needs—including 44% of Democratic parents.

³ National Parents Union and Echelon Insights, "National Parents Union Survey of K-12 Public School Parents," February 2021. Accessed from <https://nationalparentsunion.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NPU-Deck-February-2021-HIGHLIGHTS.pdf> and <https://mercuryllc.app.box.com/s/u6madmb7fbyt1549knwji0ruipvolq90>

5) *Families deserve to know how money is being used and the impact it's having.*

When it comes to this wave of stimulus funding, parents across the board—but especially Democratic parents—want to know that their tax dollars are being used effectively. They want transparency in how the money is being spent, and they want regular updates on whether student performance is increasing over time. The recent national parent poll found that parents put a high priority on transparency, especially Democratic parents:



This strong support for transparency and visible impact offers further support for advocates in demanding that federal funds be used for forward-looking, transformative investments in schools. Parents and voters don't want to see this opportunity lost by spending a unique infusion of federal funding on business as usual; they want to understand where the money is going and what impact it's having on student achievement in the short and long-term. If this money is spent and parents can't point to the changes that were made as a result, elected leaders will have fallen short in their eyes.

Winning messaging principles for blue states

We're starting from a strong position, especially among Democrats—there is intense support for the American Rescue Plan and broad agreement that its time for need big, transformative change. To make the most of this moment and secure ongoing support for new initiatives, communications from advocates in blue states should follow a set of messaging principles that tap into Democrats' attitudes and values.

The insights outlined throughout this guide point to a clear bottom-line message: **policymakers should embrace need big, bold, student-centered change, not just a return to what we've always done.** To drive that message home, advocates should follow a few key messaging principles when talking to legislators and policymakers in blue states, and to Democratic voters directly:

1. **Speak to the pain points.**
2. **Establish a bold vision.**
3. **Focus on who benefits.**

These principles provide an overarching framework that advocates across states can use to make the case for a range of different initiatives using American Rescue Plan funding.

1. **Speak to the pain points.** To galvanize voters and policymakers around this unprecedented moment, be clear that many of the biggest problems aren't new—they've been exposed or exacerbated by the pandemic. This federal funding is an opportunity to tackle long-standing unfairness in the education system.

Sample message points:

- We had big problems in our school system long before the pandemic. We need to take this opportunity to fix the real problems in our schools, not just try to get back to the status quo—particularly when it comes to the low-income, Black, and Latino students who have been neglected by our school system for too long.
- For decades, we've been failing kids by unfairly funding schools and refusing to bring in new ideas or make the real changes we need in schools, and this federal funding gives us an opportunity to finally change that.

2. **Establish a bold vision.** Democrats are eager for bold, transformative action in schools. By situating advocacy and messaging for specific initiatives in service of a broader vision for the future of education, you can show Democratic voters and policymakers that you are aligned on what needs to be done to ensure all kids live successful, fulfilling lives. This wave of funding can't just return the system to a status quo that has reinforced inequities for decades—it needs to steer toward a broader vision for real change.

Sample message points:

- We have a responsibility to use every tool at our disposal to help students recover from the impacts of the pandemic and give them the education they deserve. We can't just spend more money the way we always have; we need to use this federal funding to take bold steps and start fixing the real problems in our schools.
- Our kids deserve schools that work for their individual needs. Let's use this unique infusion of federal funding to give teachers and schools more flexibility, offer kids more personal attention, and prepare every student for a successful, fulfilling life. Every child, no matter their background, deserves a great education at a school that's right for them.

3. **Focus on who benefits.** The pandemic has affected every student and family in different ways, and this new federal funding is needed to ensure education system is able to serve every child's individual needs. Democrats are particularly concerned about the needs of vulnerable kids who have been hit hardest by the pandemic, but they equally acknowledge the shared struggles that all kids have faced. Messaging about how to use this federal funding needs to be big and offer a better vision of education for every child, while simultaneously responding to the disproportionate impact that the pandemic has had on low-income Black and Brown students and communities.

Sample message points:

- Every student deserves a great education at a school that puts their needs first, regardless of their zip code, income, or race. This new federal funding is a unique opportunity to make real changes in our schools so we can make good on that promise.
- Every student and every family has been affected by this pandemic, and that impact has fallen most heavily on the most vulnerable students. We need to make real changes in our schools to make sure every student gets the support that's right for their unique needs, particularly those hit hardest over the past year.

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Key policy areas: parental attitudes and messaging guidance

Beneath this umbrella message about the need for big, transformative steps to rethink education, the remainder of this guide focuses on data and messaging guidance around a few specific policy areas of interest: funding a range of delivery models; offering high-quality tutoring; fixing funding formulas; improving postsecondary pathways; and responding to social-emotional health needs. In each of these areas, there is clear appetite from parents, including Democratic parents—and with the right language, advocates can attract strong interest and support from parents for these ideas.

Funding a range of delivery models

It's widely believed among Democratic voters and parents that a one-size-fits-all approach to education doesn't work. Given the individual needs of students and the diverse range of situations school systems are facing, advocates have space to make the case for a greater variety of delivery models.

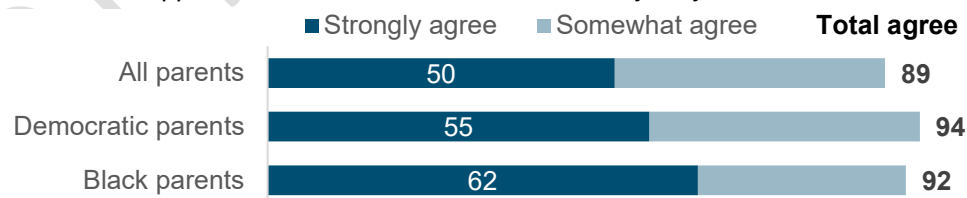
There is no one unified vision among parents for how to spend this new federal money. Rather, they want to see it spent in a way that will enable students and their families to meet their own specific needs.

Parents are keen on making a range of options available, including direct funding to families. Parents are on the frontlines of their children's education—even more so over the last year with at-home instruction—and often feel they know best what their child needs to succeed. 62% of parents believe **\$500 direct grants to parents** would be effective in supporting their child's personal educational needs, so that parents have some flexibility of educational support that their child responds to best. This number is even higher among Black parents (71%) and Democratic parents (73%).

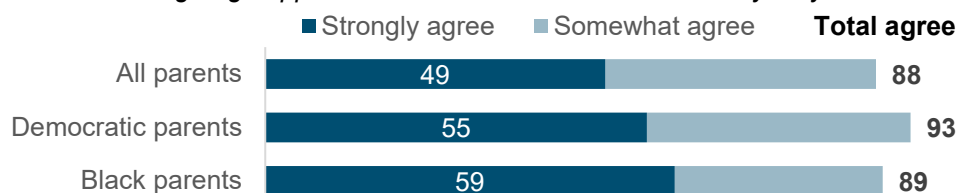
Parents' responses to specific potential uses of federal funding also reflect their interest in a greater range of options. When asked what would have the *greatest* positive impact on students and families, a proposal to **“create more school options, like charter schools or learning pods, so that families can choose the school that best meets their child's unique needs”** was among the **top three most effective steps** in their eyes—and Black parents and Democrats are even more supportive.

When talking about reimagining learning for all students and the desire (and need) for a range of solutions, it's critical to root messaging in what's best for students. There's no single magic word here; the key is the “why” – its time for more innovation, more flexibility, more different models in order to ensure each student can learn in the way that best suits their unique needs.

*The past year has shown that we need **more innovation in our schools**, so we can use cutting-edge approaches to teach each student the way they learn best.*



*The past year has shown that we need **more flexibility to try different models in our schools**, so we can use cutting-edge approaches to teach each student the way they learn best.*



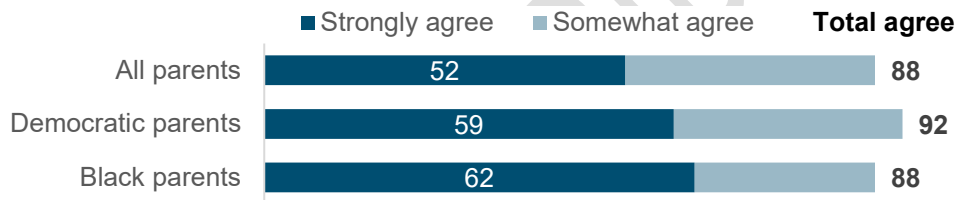
High-quality tutoring

The pandemic hasn't affected everyone the same way; different students are coming in with different needs, and flexibility is needed to address them all. There is widespread recognition that each student needs to be supported in the way that best suits them, and that this may look different for different students. Investing in a high-quality tutoring program not only combats learning loss at all levels but gives every parent and student access to additional support.

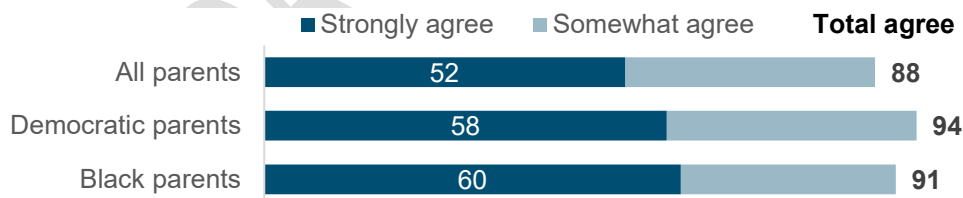
- 69% of parents, including 79% of Black and 79% of Democratic parents think that expanding high quality tutoring programs will be effective in helping students.
- And if high-quality tutoring were significantly expanded at their child's school, 88% of parents say they would use these services—including 51% who say they would *definitely* use these services.

It's important to acknowledge this isn't just about the kids who have been hit the hardest by the pandemic. Parents, especially Democrats, of course believe tutoring will help the most vulnerable students, but they respond equally strongly to a more universal framing. **This is an opportunity to have a transformative impact on what education looks like for *all* students next year, not just offer targeted help for those at the bottom, and messaging should reflect that.**

The pandemic affected every student differently, which is why we should invest in tools like tutoring so our schools can support the individual needs of every student.



The pandemic hit some students much harder than others, which is why we should invest in tools like tutoring so our schools can support the needs of the most vulnerable students.

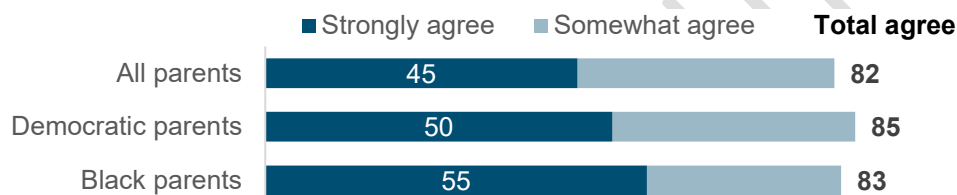


Funding formula fixes

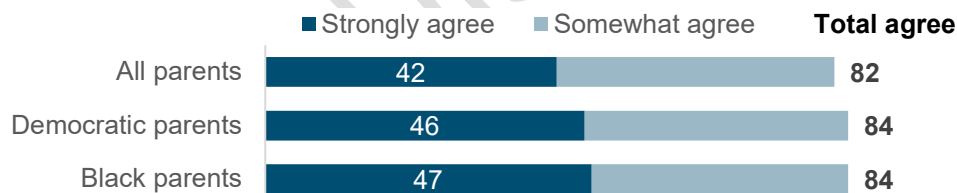
A chief goal for Democratic parents is to make the education system more equitable for all students, and part of that means fixing how schools are funded. One of the biggest reasons that parents are looking for big, transformative action on education is so that resources are allocated more equitably and every individual child can get the education and support that they deserve. Parents don't want a return to normal; they want to address the fundamental unfairness in the school system and offer more kids a change for the great education that they deserve.

School funding formulas are a complex and sometimes controversial topic. To make a case for fixing funding formulas that earns strong and widespread support from parents and voters, **stay out of the weeds, and instead focus on shared Democratic values, like fairness and opportunity**. The bottom line for policymakers and elected officials is that parents, including Democratic parents, **strongly support changes to make school funding fairer and allow it to respond to students' individual needs**.

*It's not good enough to keep spending our education dollars the way we always have. We need real changes so that **school funding is fairer** for every individual child.*



*It's not good enough to keep spending our education dollars the way we always have. We need real changes so that **school funding follows students' individual needs**.*



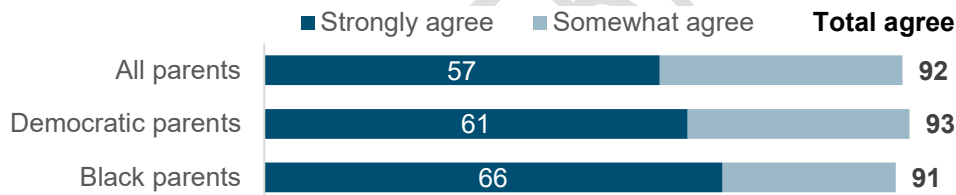
Postsecondary pathways

Parents respond intensely and universally to the idea that schools need to better prepare children for life after high school, so that each child has the opportunity to pursue their passions and live up to their potential. While parents want their children to prepare for college or learn skills for future jobs, they overwhelmingly agree that schools should provide the resources and support needed to bring out the best in their children, whatever that path may look like.

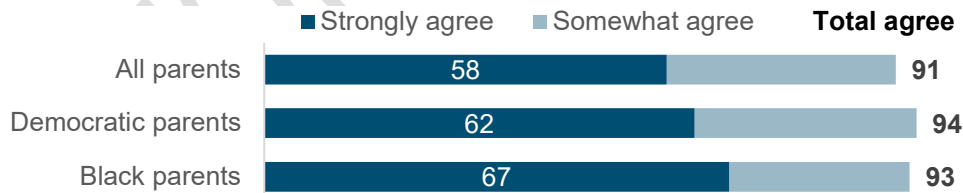
76% of parents believe an effective use of federal funds would be to offer more opportunities for students to earn college credits while in high school or to participate in work-based learning programs or apprenticeships in various career fields. And 50% of parents say that they wish schools in their own community offered more opportunities for students to earn college credits or participate in work-based learning programs or apprenticeships.

More importantly, this doesn't have to be about steering certain kids into trade schools versus four-year college; rather, parents are responding to a broader notion that **schools need to be more connected to career pathways to prepare all students for successful, fulfilling lives**, even in an economy that's changing faster than ever.

*As we return from the pandemic, it's more important than ever that our schools focus on **preparing students for successful and fulfilling lives.***



*As we return from the pandemic, it's more important than ever that our schools focus on **preparing students to succeed in a rapidly changing world.***



Social-emotional and mental health support

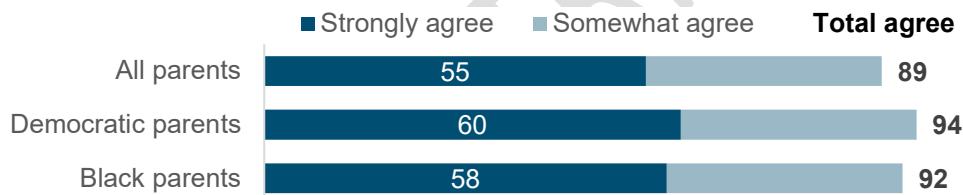
This past year has been beyond stressful and at times traumatic for many students dealing with the uncertainty of the pandemic, the loss of loved ones, and the country’s racial reckoning. Students’ needs stretch way beyond traditional academic support, and parents know that if schools don’t focus on kids’ social-emotional needs now, it’ll be even harder to catch them up academically.

To take this large federal investment and not do anything to address the social-emotional and mental health needs of kids would be seen as a real lost opportunity. Parents want meaningful support for their children’s social-emotional and mental health needs, and they believe that this new federal funding offers a unique opportunity to step up and provide this support.

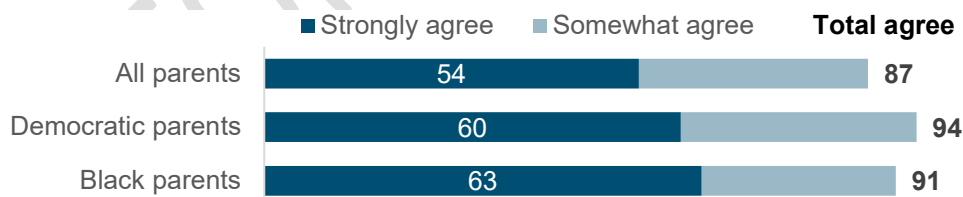
- Among parents overall, 73% believe **providing better tools to support students’ emotional and mental health** needs would be an effective use of federal money.
- Appetite for emotional and mental health support is even more acute among Democratic parents, with 83% supporting better tools to support emotional and mental health.

To make the case for these forms of support, advocates should frame the issue broadly. Parents respond very strongly to language that **frames social-emotional and mental health support as an important need for all students**, and that calls for schools to focus on this issue in ways they never have before:

*The pandemic has had **serious social, emotional, and mental health impacts on students, even for those who are on track academically.***



*Our schools need to be **prepared to support students’ emotional and mental health needs in ways they’ve never done before.***



Advocates should feel confident about making the case to policymakers for more resources in this space, and they should highlight the mental and social-emotional health components of policy agendas that they’re presenting to policymakers.

Putting It All Together: The Message in Action

To illustrate how this messaging guidance comes together, below is a sample letter to the editor from an advocate that brings together different messaging elements to appeal to Democratic parents and their elected leaders.

The past year has been the most challenging of our lifetimes. As a parent, I've seen firsthand the way that the pandemic has turned our kids' lives upside down, especially when it comes to their education. Our school district and our kids' teachers worked hard all year to keep things going, but remote learning was still a serious challenge—for *all* of our kids, but especially for the most vulnerable students.

But as we look toward the light at the end of the tunnel and think about how to move forward from the pandemic, it's essential that we remember the problems in our school system aren't new. For decades, we've seen low-income, Black, and Latino kids left behind because schools were funded unfairly and because politicians and the education bureaucracy refused to bring in new ideas or make real changes. Getting kids back in the classroom and going back to the way we've always done things won't fix these problems. In the words of President Biden, we owe it to our kids to "build back better."

That's why I believe so strongly that it's time for policymakers to embrace big, bold changes in our schools that put the needs of students at the center, not just try to get back to the status quo. The recent federal stimulus includes billions of dollars of funding for our state, and our elected leaders should use that money to move us toward a new vision for education that gives every single child in our state the opportunity for a great public education that prepares them for successful, fulfilling lives—regardless of their zip code, income, or race.

We have a responsibility to use every tool at our disposal to make that happen. That means providing funding to make in-school tutoring available for every student, so kids can get back on track and get ahead as we return from the pandemic. It means reforming outdated and unfair funding formulas that have reinforced inequities in our school system. And it means giving students more school options, like charter schools or learning pods, so that every kid can get an education that works for their unique needs. *(Note: this message frame can work for a wide range of specific policies.)*

This influx of federal funding is a unique opportunity to take the bold steps we need to fix longstanding problems and inequities in our schools, so we can finally give every student a fair shot at a great education. Let's take advantage of it.