



**Great!**  
SCHOOLS.org

# HOPES, DREAMS, & WORRIES

INSIGHTS SURVEY  
2019-2020

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the leading provider of school quality information, GreatSchools is committed to understanding how families make choices about schools and measuring the impact of our information in order to provide our users with meaningful and actionable educational content. During the summer of 2019 and 2020, we surveyed our subscribers to learn more about their hopes and concerns related to their child's education.

As a whole, GreatSchools subscribers represent groups of people who are particularly interested in educational content; however, we chose to limit our analysis to only parents and educators. Through the survey, we found that parents and educators are both concerned about life skills and academic learning. We also found areas of contrast with regard to what these stakeholder groups believe constitutes educational quality and best practices.

Where parents indicated that academic growth is the most important sign of a good school, educators indicated that a school's effort to help all students succeed is what matters most. When asked about what learning practices schools should prioritize, parents and educators *both* indicated the value of learning to read and write at an advanced level. Their opinions on what to prioritize, however, differed with parents indicating that they prefer STEM education, while educators preferred more hands-on learning.

Our parent users are far from a monolithic group. Their priorities and concerns vary based on their child's developmental stage, their economic status, and ethnic background. All parents indicated that being on track academically was a primary concern. Where Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian and white subscribers indicated worry about learning gaps in their child's education, Black, Hispanic/Latino/Latine and Native American parents were more often worried about their child's academic and physical well-being. Black, Hispanic/Latino/Latine and Native American parents also often indicated that they define their child's success as having a fulfilling and meaningful career, while Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian and white subscribers more often define their child's success as love, friendship, and relationships.

## What do parents worry about when they think about their children's future? What do educators wish schools would prioritize? How do parents define their children's success?

Nearly 9,453 GreatSchools subscribers answered these questions and more in two annual surveys given in November 2019 and 2020 that explored the wishes, worries, and practices of parents, caregivers, and educators across the country. The recurring GreatSchools Insights Survey offers a unique opportunity to better understand education's two largest and most important adult stakeholders: parents and educators. It also offers a glimpse into how parents from different backgrounds think about their children's schooling and what has changed and what has persisted since March 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic closed many of the nation's schools and families and educators adapted to distance learning.

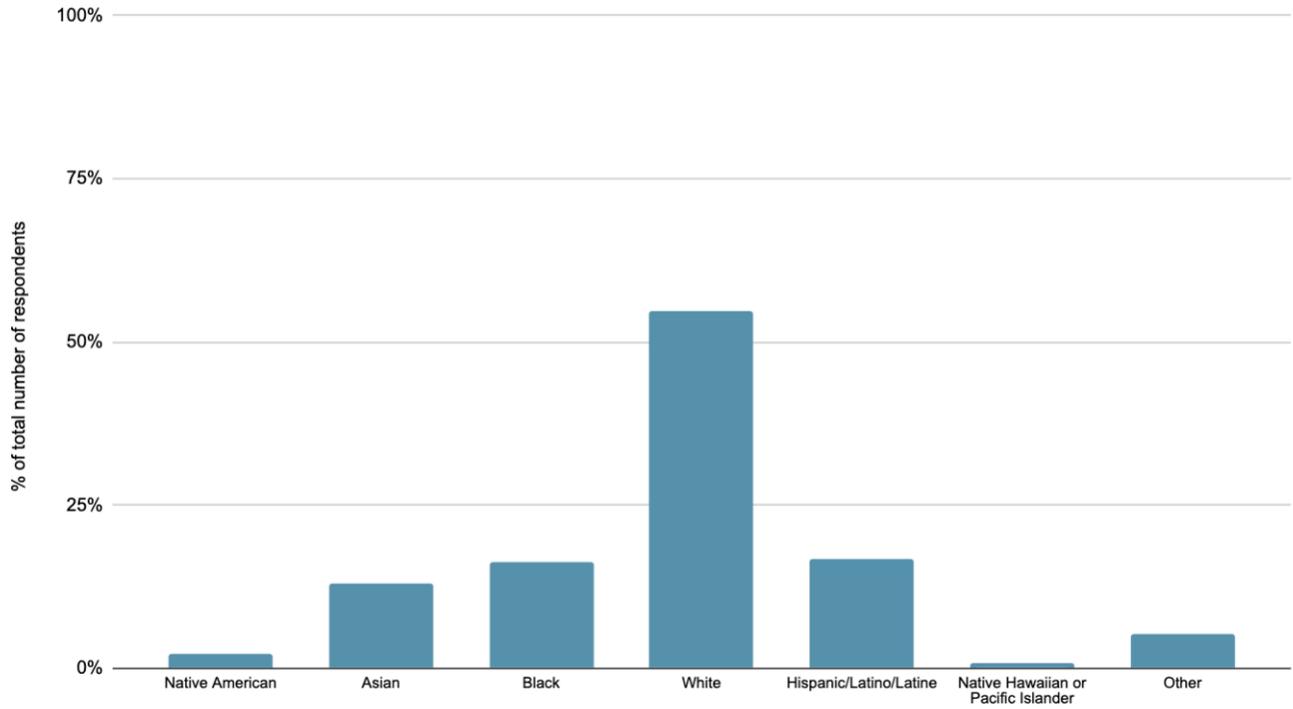
### OUR METHODOLOGY

The GreatSchools Insights Survey reflects an attempt to understand the hearts and minds of engaged users of GreatSchools' platforms, which include school profiles about every public and private K-12 school in the nation, a weekly newsletter, and year-round grade-based newsletters for parents, caregivers, and educators of kindergartners through 12th graders. In this sense, the survey, which was sent to more than 800,000 subscribers who signed up to receive parenting guidance, learning resources, or educational information about a school, represents groups of people who are particularly engaged in education. GreatSchools subscribers include parents, grandparents, caregivers, educators, and education professionals from across the country. In 2019, the first year the survey was administered, there were 5,266 survey respondents; in 2020, there were 4,187 survey respondents.

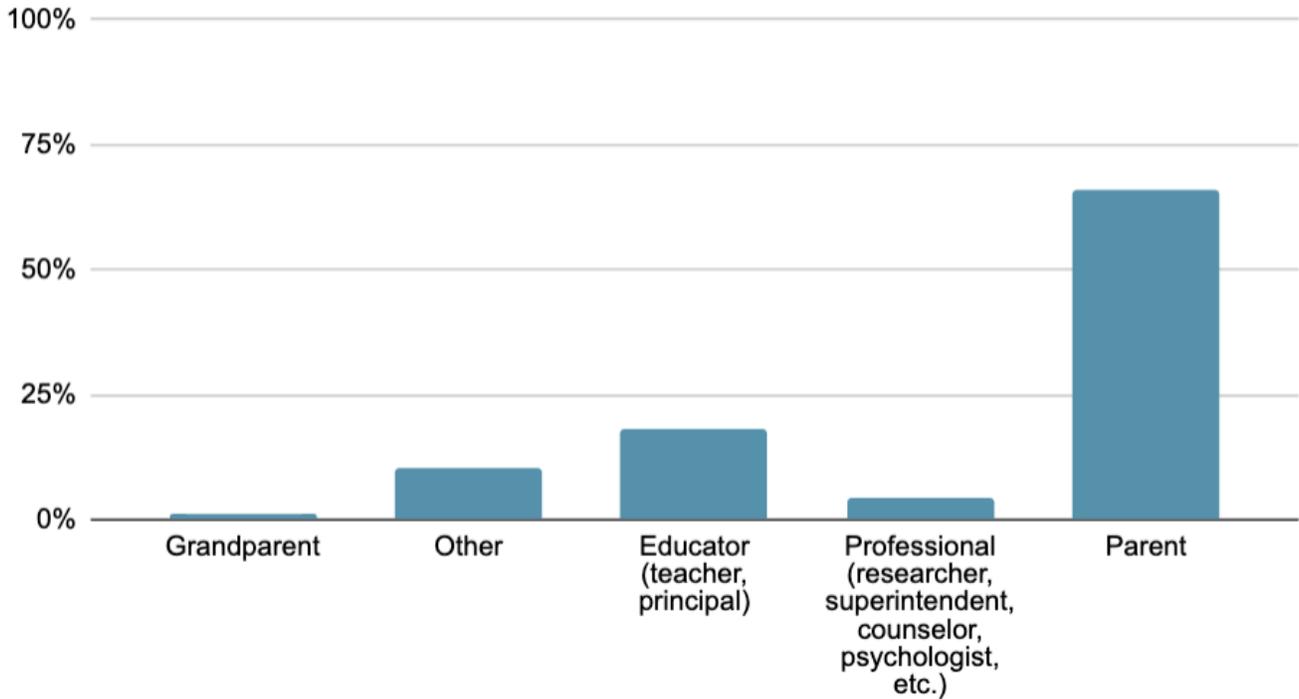
No survey can claim to be perfectly representative of a country as large and diverse as the United States. Nevertheless, these survey respondents represent a diverse swath of America. Forty-nine percent of respondents identify themselves as people of color, including 16% who identify as Black and 17% as Hispanic/Latino/Latine. Thirty-one percent of respondents report that they live in a household with an annual income of less than \$50,000. Respondents are also broadly representative in terms of where they live: 33% live in urban communities, 47% in suburban, and 15% in rural communities, respectively.<sup>1</sup> The respondents also reflect diverse forms of caretaking with many multigenerational households, as 11% of respondents identified themselves as grandparents or family caretakers, compared to parents (66%) and educators (18%). Finally, respondents represent a range of ages: 7% are 18-34 years old, 46% are 35-49 years old, and 35% are 50 years old or older.

<sup>1</sup> Five percent of respondents report that they live outside the US.

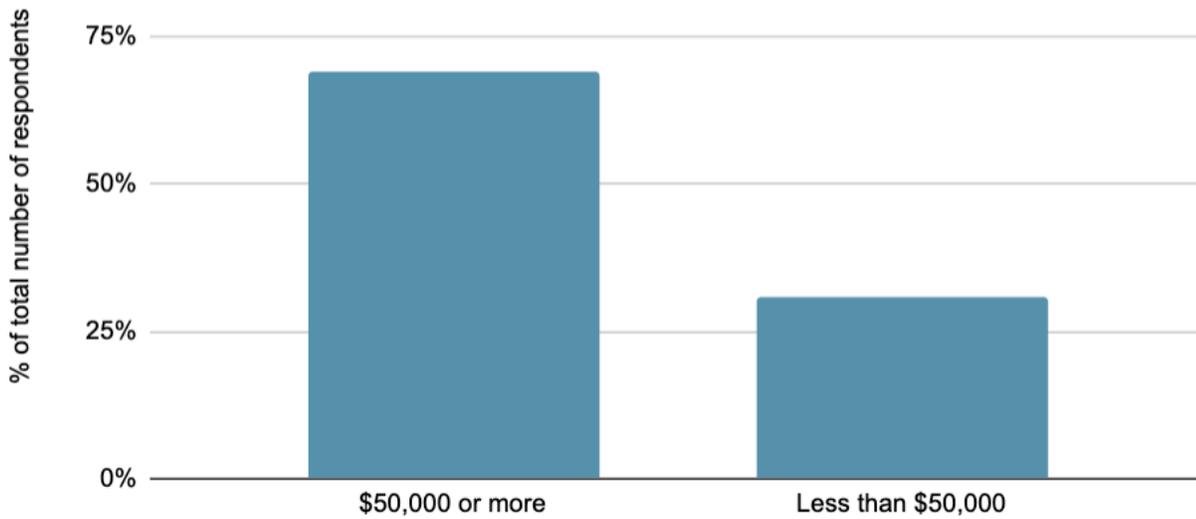
## Race/Ethnicity



## Role



## Family income

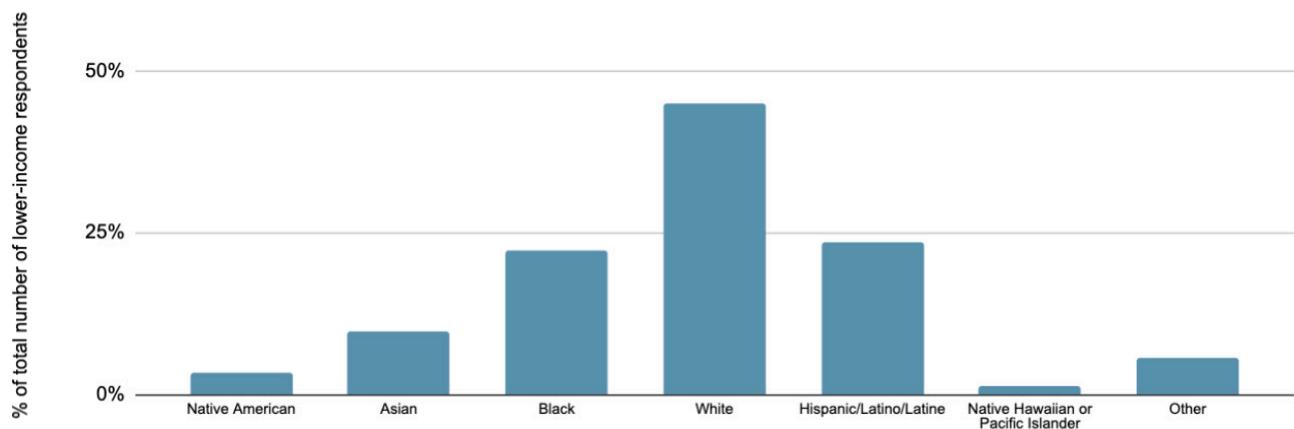


## FOCUS ON LOW-INCOME<sup>2</sup> AUDIENCE

Low-income respondents are representative of low-income communities nationwide. Among low-income respondents, higher percentages report being Black (22% compared to 14% of non-low-income respondents) or Hispanic/Latino/Latine (23% compared to 14% of non-low-income respondents). They are also more likely to be young: 16% are 18-

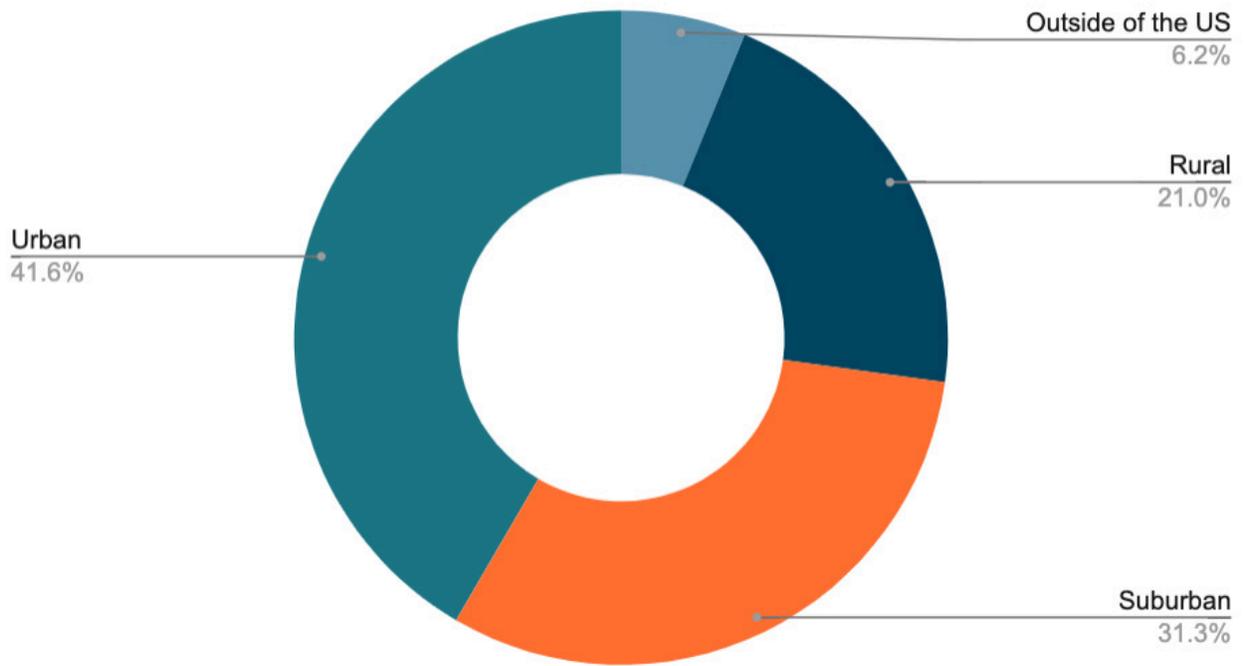
34 years old compared to 6% of non-low-income respondents. Finally, low-income respondents are less likely to live in suburban areas: 42% live in urban areas (compared to 31% of non-low-income respondents) while 21% reported living in a rural setting (compared to 12% of non-low-income respondents).

## Race/Ethnicity

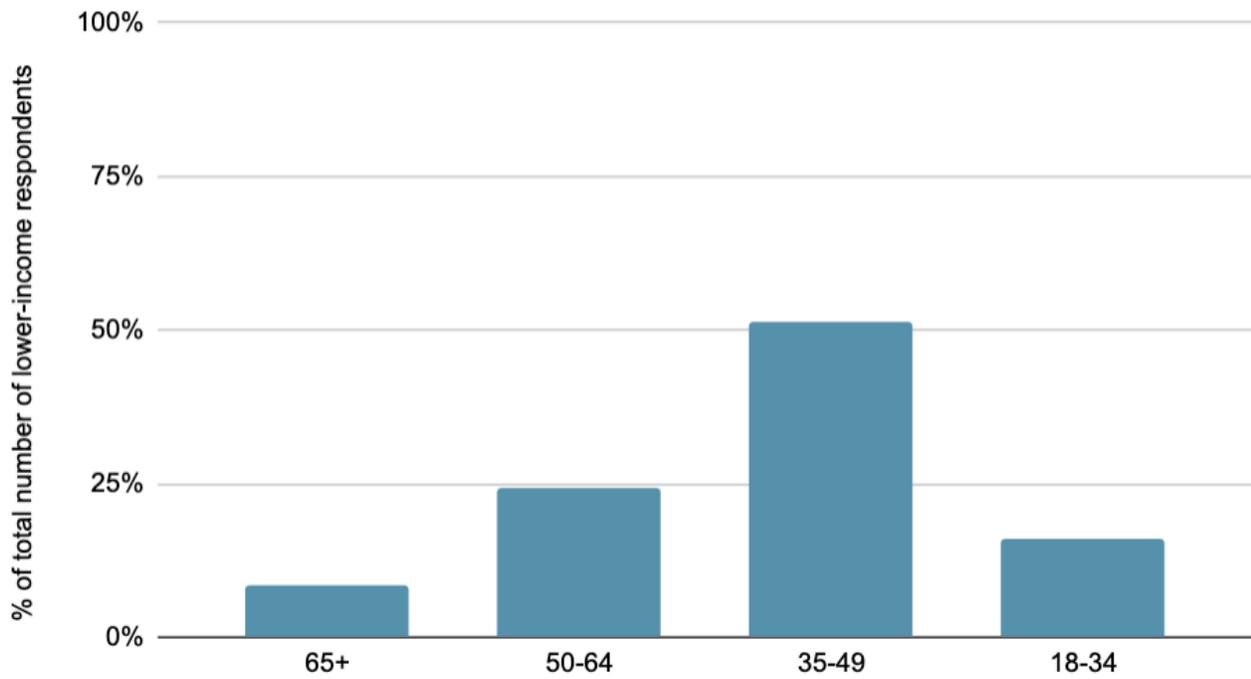


<sup>2</sup> In this report, "low-income" is defined as families with a household income of less than \$50,000 per year.

## Community



## Age



As is true for most self-reported research, this survey measures what respondents openly express about their educational priorities. Research suggests that there is often a gap between self-reported beliefs and real-life behavior, and so it's likely that some of the opinions expressed reflect what respondents think they *should value* as much or more than their actual beliefs or behaviors. As a supplier of school information, GreatSchools has had ample opportunity to measure such gaps in what parents value in school quality information. For instance, internal and external research suggested that parents would not be interested in disaggregated information about equitable learning outcomes, but when offered the information on GreatSchools school profiles, users interacted with this information first and user testing suggested that equity data influenced their opinion of a school's quality. Further research that seeks to understand the distinctions between parents' and educators' self-reported and actual beliefs/behaviors is needed to draw more definitive conclusions.

The survey design split the group of respondents based on their self-identified roles. Respondents who self-identified as being parents or caregivers/grandparents were asked to answer a series of questions about the oldest child they care for. Respondents who self-identified as educators (teachers or principals) were asked a similar set of questions about the students they serve. We focused our analysis on the two largest groups of respondents — parents and educators — and excluded responses from grandparents, caregivers, and education professionals.

## PARENTS VS. EDUCATORS

In media depictions of educational issues, parents and educators are often framed as either opposing factions or a united front. Rarely are such blanket representations accurate. Both groups reflect a diversity of viewpoints and educational priorities whose opinions and behaviors change based on their context, such as the kinds of educational opportunities available to their children/students

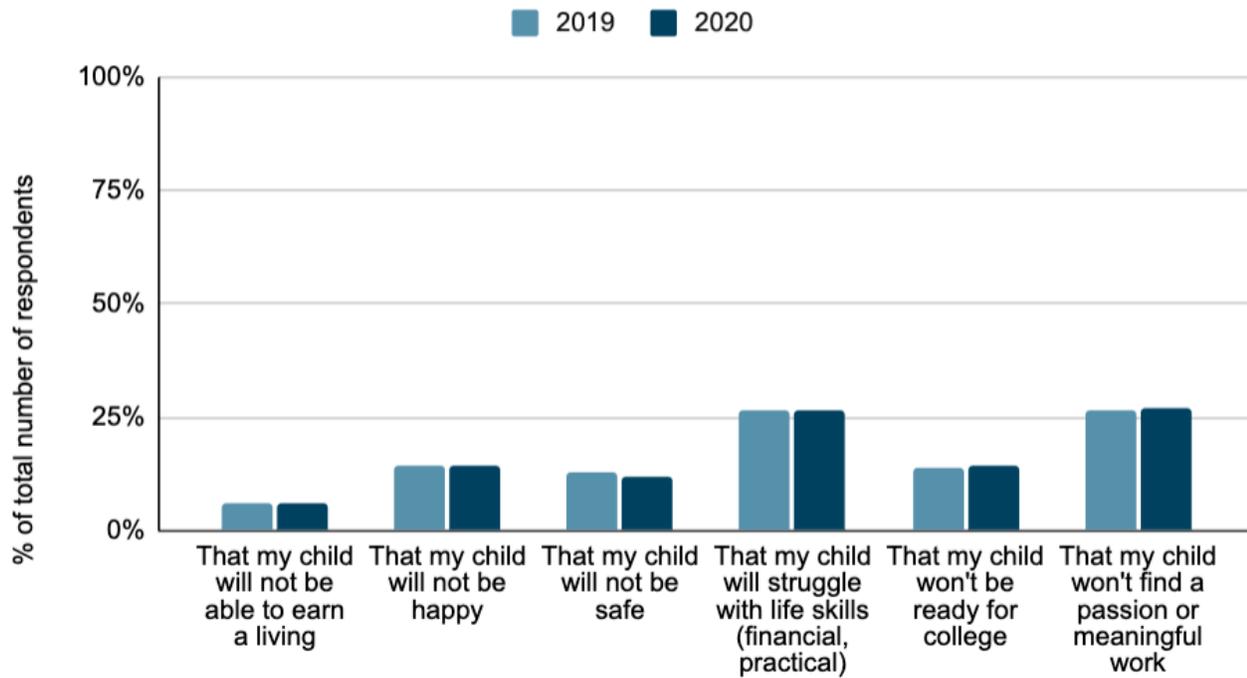
and their personal values. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, they were also both groups that traditionally lacked the power to have a significant influence on our education system, with the notable exception of [teacher's unions](#). In this sense they are essential groups to learn from yet they often go unheard. The GreatSchools Insights Survey offers an opportunity to explore how these two stakeholder perspectives concur and contrast in terms of their educational priorities and how things may have changed over the past year.

## THE LIFE SKILLS GAP

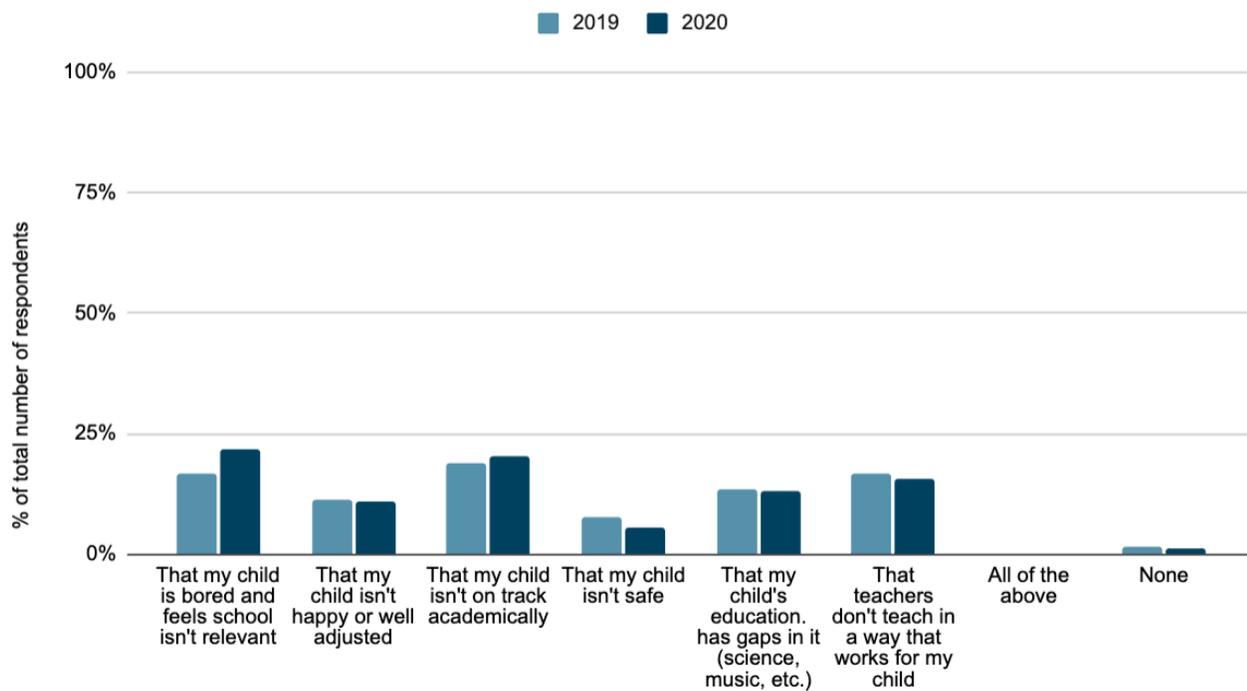
Parents and educators shared surprisingly similar underlying concerns about the children in their lives and what they need to be successful. When asked about a range of biggest fears for the children's future, including financial, career, mental health, college readiness, and physical safety, both parents and educators reported being most worried that children will struggle with life skills. (Educators: 39% in 2019; 42% in 2020. Parents: 27% both years.) (Note that an equal percentage of parents (27%) reported that their biggest worry about their children's future was "not finding meaningful work or a passion.") When asked about how they define children's success, both parents and educators are most likely to define success as the ability to "learn from experience and be resilient in the face of difficulties" (Educators: 52% in 2019; 53% in 2020. Parents: 37% in 2019; 39% in 2020.)

When asked about specific worries about the current education of their children/students, parents and educators both expressed concerns about academic learning. Equal percentages of parents and educators said they were worried that their children/students are not on track academically (Parents: 19% in 2019; 20% in 2020. Educators: 21% both years), but educators were more likely to cite "educational gaps" in their students' academics (24% in 2019; 29% in 2020), whereas parents were more concerned that children are "bored and feel school isn't relevant" (17% in 2019; 22% in 2020).

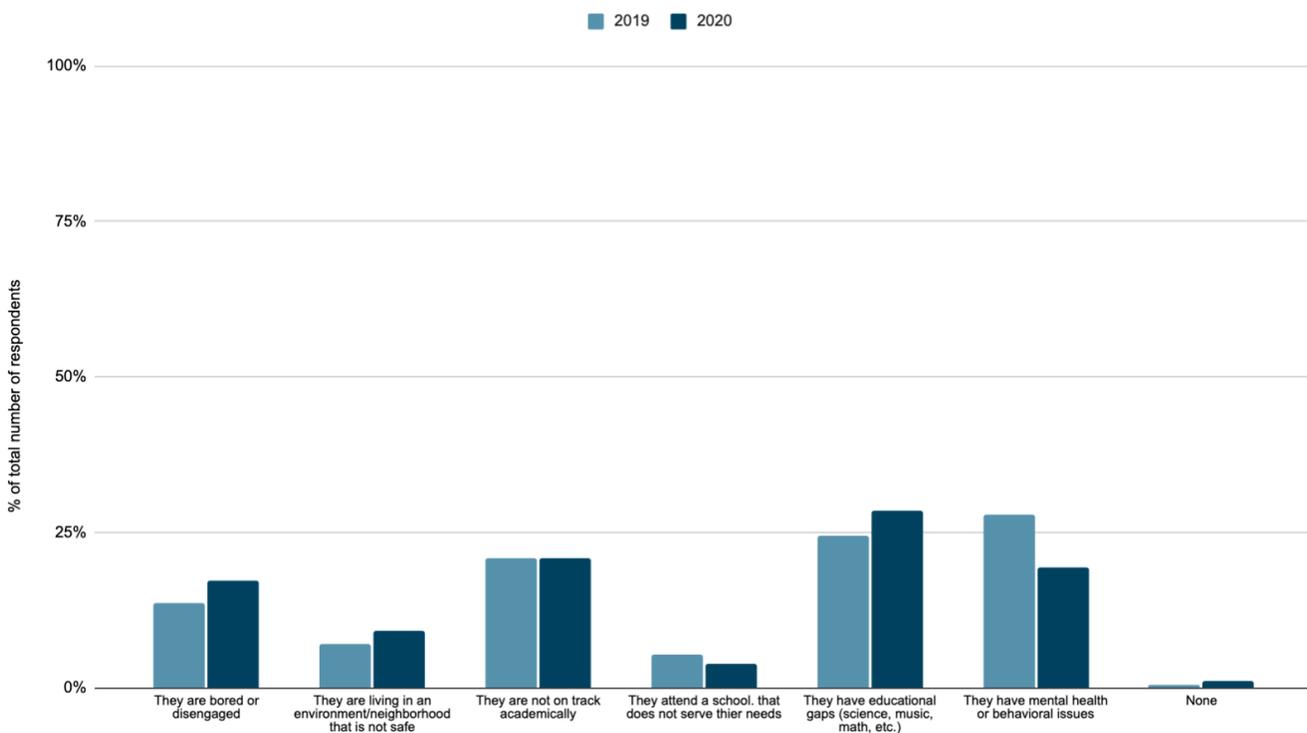
## Parents' biggest worry about their child's future



## Parents' biggest worry about their child's education



## Educators' biggest worry about the children they work with



While parents and educators share many of the same priorities and concerns when it comes to educating the next generation of young people, they often differ in their opinions about what constitutes educational quality and best practices. For instance, when asked about the single most important sign of a good school, a plurality of educators (41% in 2019; 46% in 2020) chose indicators of equity — “signs that school is striving to help all students succeed.” Indicators of academic growth — “signs that students are improving academically from year to year” — are a distant second choice (24% in 2019; 23% in 2020). In contrast, when parents were asked to choose the most important indicator of school quality, a plurality of parents selected indicators related to academic growth (35% in both years).

While we know parents value standardized testing<sup>3</sup>, our findings suggest that parents don’t believe test

scores alone are the strongest sign of a quality school. Only 1% of educators in 2019 and 0.6% in 2020 chose test scores as the best sign of a good school. Slightly more parents selected test scores as the most important indicator of school quality: 6% in 2019 and 5% in 2020. This suggests that parents value understanding how their child is making progress over time based on test scores but that test scores alone should not rise to the top to measure school quality.

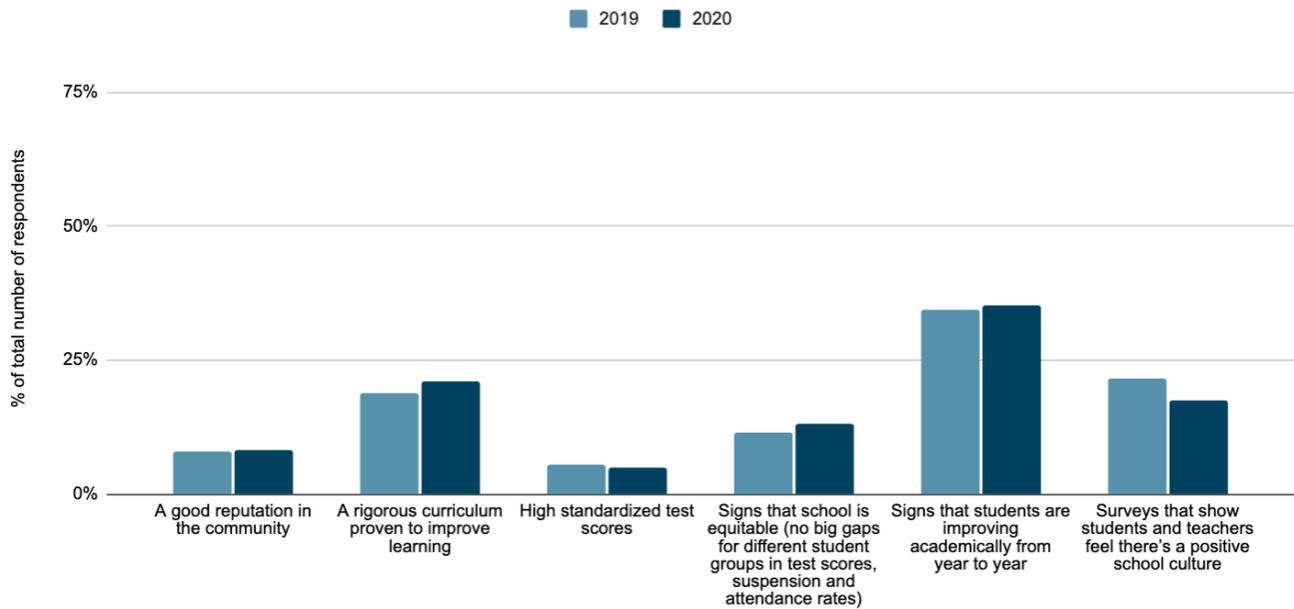
Similarly, when asked about what subjects and learning experiences schools should prioritize, parents and educators both strongly believe in the value of learning to “read and write at an advanced level” (Educators: 62% in both years. For parents, it is the second choice in both years at 60% in 2019 and 62% in 2020.). But beyond this shared value, they diverge. Most parents prioritized STEM education

<sup>3</sup> [Poll results](#) from the National PTA and Learning Heroes show that 52% of parents surveyed supported standardized testing during the pandemic year.

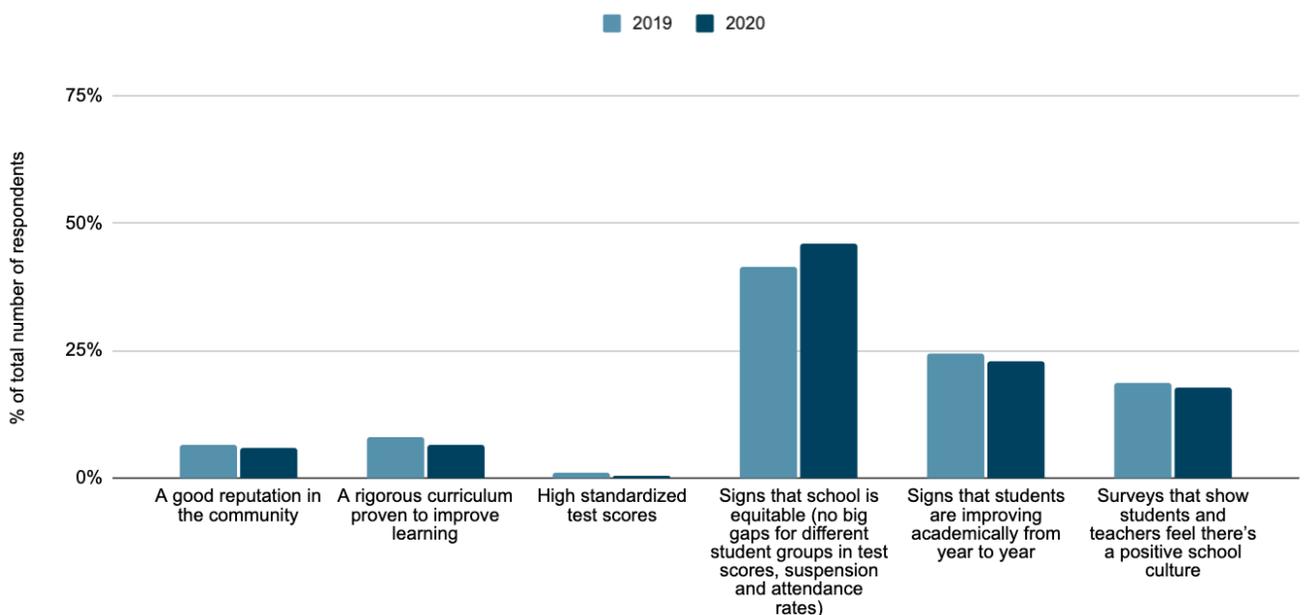
(68% in 2019; 67% in 2020), while educators voiced a preference for more hands-on learning: real-world learning (59% in 2019; 58% in 2020) and interdisciplinary learning (50% in both years). Sports excellence was the least popular choice for both educators and parents.

Such distinctions make sense. Both parents and educators are looking at the same generation of children and seeing the same problems. But they have distinct perspectives on the educational solutions.

## Parents' signs of a quality school



## Educators' signs of a quality school



## WHAT'S CHANGED IN THE PAST YEAR?

Perhaps the most surprising takeaway from comparing the 2019 and 2020 responses is how little has changed about parents' and educators' educational values, priorities, and worries. Not surprisingly, the largest shift for parents was in the area of practice and the time they spend on supporting their children's schoolwork. In 2019, 24% of parents said they support their children's school work multiple times a day; in 2020 it jumped to 33%. Ironically, in a year when many experts have expressed concerns about children's mental health in the face of online learning, socially distanced classrooms, and pandemic anxiety, one of the only marked changes is that fewer educators named mental health as their top concern (25% in 2019 vs. 17% in 2020). Instead, more educators chose academic-related answers as bigger worries, perhaps reflecting the growing awareness of pandemic-era learning loss.

## PARENTS VS. PARENTS

As GreatSchools has learned again and again, parents are far from a monolithic group. Not only do they reflect different educational priorities based on their age, race, and socioeconomic backgrounds, but their concerns and priorities also vary based on the individual strengths and developmental stage of their children. Parents of kindergartners think differently about the purpose and problems of education than do the parents of high school students. Likewise, parents who have the economic resources to offer their children educational opportunities beyond what's offered by the school may have different concerns and priorities than parents who can't afford extra academic support or enrichment for their children.

Among Black, Hispanic/Latino/Latine, and Native American parents, responses suggest broad concerns about their children's academic and physical well-being. Although not being on track academically was the top current concern for both groups, Native

Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian and white parents were slightly more likely to be worried (19% of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian and white parents compared to 17% of Black, Hispanic/Latino/Latine and Native American parents). When asked about fears about the future, a smaller percentage of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian, and white parents expressed concerns that their children wouldn't be ready for college (12% of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian, and white parents, compared to 20% of Black, Hispanic/Latino/Latine and Native American parents), but more said their biggest fear was that their child would not be happy (15% of Black, Hispanic/Latino/Latine and Native American parents, compared to 11% of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian, and white parents). In contrast, Black, Hispanic/Latino/Latine and Native American parents were more likely to say their greatest fear was that their children would not be safe (14% of Black, Hispanic/Latino/Latine and Native American parents, compared to 11% of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian and white parents).

Interestingly, while the ability to "learn from experience and be resilient in the face of difficulties" was the most common definition of success for their child, Black, Hispanic/Latino/Latine and Native American parents were more likely to define their children's success in terms of "having a fulfilling and meaningful career" (24%) compared to Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian, and white parents (14%). However, there was a larger proportion of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian, and white respondents who defined success as "finding love, friends, and a strong positive community" (27% of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian, and white parents compared to 19% of Black, Hispanic/Latino/Latine and Native American parents). One way to interpret this is that parents of color may be focused on a hierarchy of needs with a fulfilling and a meaningful career being more practically important than a positive community or personal relationships. This interpretation is countered by the fact that the two least popular responses for both groups was

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“financial success” and “having their own family.” Another possible explanation is that Black, Hispanic/Latino/Latine and Native American parents have more confidence that their children will have close-knit communities. In contrast, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Asian, and white parents may be more confident about their children’s potential career opportunities but less confident that their child will find love and strong community ties

## DISCUSSION

The responses to these questions reflect just how complex and varied parents’ and educators’ views are when it comes to preparing the next generation for success. They show clear commonalities: the vast majority of parents and educators express skepticism about the value of a school’s reputation or test scores. Both groups also evince a recurring focus on helping young people develop the resilience and life skills they need to grow up and meet the challenges of a complex world. But there are also marked differences: educators tend to focus on the big picture; they see the value of looking for signs of equity in determining whether a school is doing its job. They also are more likely to prioritize the value of innovative educational methods — project based learning and real world experiences over academics like rigorous STEM, which are more popular with parents. Of course, as many educators know already, often the best way to teach rigorous STEM may be through robust innovative methods, but it bears observing that many parents are still more likely to value mastery of conventional subject matters (STEM, reading, writing) than the educational process (project-based learning, etc.) that might lead to that mastery.

Similarly, diverse groups of parents do not march in lockstep in terms of their educational values and priorities but they share many similarities. Parents with fewer resources express more worry about their children’s college readiness and whether they are on track academically, but that does not mean their concerns for their children are solely academic.

All parents express aspirational ideals for their children’s future: success isn’t about having money or even a family, but the capacity to negotiate a lifetime of experiences (and learn from those experiences) and meaning (whether in the form of a career or relationships). Whatever the case, this study should suggest that despite their distinct vantage points, parents and educators both see education as a bridge not only to a better future, but a more meaningful life.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This analysis comes at an opportune time for us at GreatSchools. During the first months of 2021, we collaborated with our Research Advisory Committee (RAC) to solidify our School Quality Framework and our internal process for deciding how to use new data types. Based on these findings, we will be implementing several new initiatives on our site.

For over 20 years, we’ve been the only national organization to collect and analyze data from all 51 state departments of education and the federal government to provide research insights and school quality ratings. We continue to advocate for data transparency at the state level and seek out new partnerships to provide parents with information that will enable them to obtain a great education for their child. Organizationally, we have challenged ourselves to clearly define what it means to apply an “equity lens” to our evolving displays of school quality information. We’ve also grappled with how we can use annual and new projects, such as the College Success Award (CSA), to promote signs of equity as a meaningful indicator of school quality.

We continue to use the CSA to celebrate high schools that excel at ensuring their students enroll and persist in college. This summer, we will also **pilot new data types** that speak to students’ psychological and physical safety and access to advanced coursework, both priorities that subscribers of color expressed during the last two years. We believe that this type of content will help parents know what excellence and effective practices look like; and by

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doing so, broaden their definition of a quality school.

We will also double down on equity by using site instrumentation tools to gather information from often unheard voices — parents of color and those whose household income is less than \$50,000. We plan to introduce **User-Generated Content (UGC)** onto school profiles that will prompt parents to share their perspective on practices within their school building. Outside of capturing their perspectives through these live surveys on school profiles, we also have the capability to reach out to parents who have signed up to follow and receive emails about a particular school and ask them to complete short surveys for additional UGC reflecting on reported practices. This will complement the existing *Community Reviews* module on our site by shining a light on equity-focused practices that research shows are meaningful for student success. It's also an opportunity to highlight best practices that are not always captured or systematically reported. For example, a principal might use their Official School Profile (OSP) to report that a school has robust afterschool programs — a practice research tells us can improve student outcomes — and parents can use UGC to report on equitable access to the programs for their child, the quality of the program, etc. By doing this, we aim to give parents a better

understanding of what's possible and help them build an aspirational view of quality programs.

We know that it's not enough to simply place new data or user-generated content on our site and expect parents to engage or contribute to it. In order to provide more value to parents of color, we will launch a content campaign this fall to develop editorial content that is also aligned with their unique priorities. Our team will create easy-to-use tips and video tutorials to help parents understand how to do reviews and how to provide other input on specific practices. The new data and information will also be accompanied by storytelling and articles about practical steps parents can take if they don't like what they see, giving them a sense of power and ability to take action rather than a feeling of hopelessness.

We are interested in how we can leverage these user comments with existing school data to drive improvement efforts and equity in education. Ultimately, parents will be able to see their experience reflected in a school profile, feel confident that their opinions and perspectives about their child's education is valued, helpful to other parents and feel like they have a sense of how to define an excellent education for their child.