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FOCUS GROUP REPORT

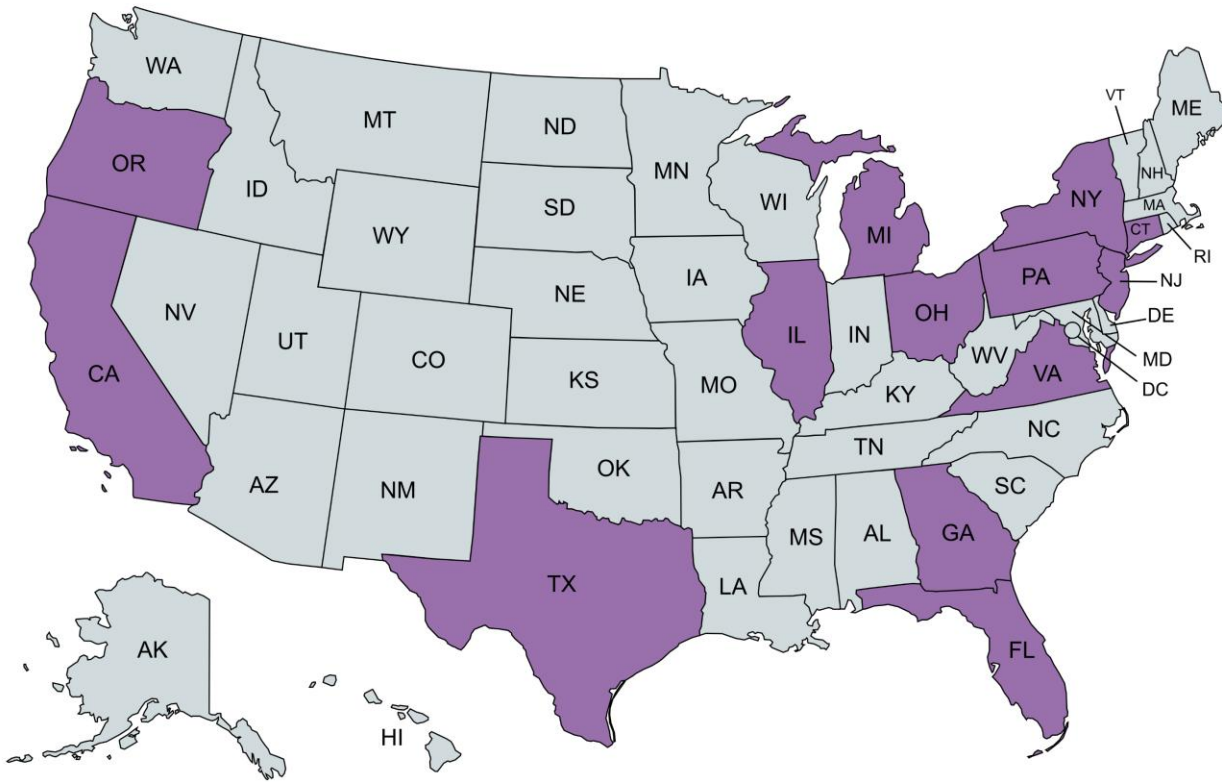
Thursday, September 4, 2025

Public School Parents and Educators
on the State of Public Schools



Methodology

On August 26, 2025, GBAO conducted three online focus groups with educators and parents, including a mix across partisanship, education (for parent groups), gender, and race.



- ❖ Group 1: Public school educators
- ❖ Group 2: Parents of public elementary school (ES) students
- ❖ Group 3: Parents of public middle school (MS) and high school (HS) students

Key Takeaways

- Educators are mostly unhappy with the state of their schools, with a lack of support and student behavior standing out as challenges
- Parents of high school and middle school students cite more anxiety about the state of public education than elementary school parents
- Parents and teachers agree students are struggling with social and critical thinking skills, made worse by the pandemic
- School safety is top of mind, and parents want a way to contact their kids at all times*
- Knowledge of how the Republican budget will impact public education is low, but parents and teachers worry about the effect of funding cuts on special education, afterschool programs, and low-income kids

Educators Feel The Weight Of Shrinking Support, Student Behavioral Issues

"[I feel] **overworked**... I think that behavior of children, the expectations of workloads, **being underpaid on top of the workloads**... It's **just pushing teachers out**. Having to deal with kids' behaviors then the parents' behaviors. And then it's just not worth the money and the stress." – VA woman, special ed teacher



"The materials are not provided. **I have to provide my own materials**. I've been printing my own stuff using my own printer because I would always make sure I get what I have to get for my student[s], but not all the teachers there can actually survive that way." – TX man, teacher



"There's just no respect. **There's no respect for adults**, whether they're instructional adults or just somebody in the grocery store. Kids are given way too much power and not taught to respect, particularly in the school setting." – NJ woman, speech language specialist

"You **don't get supported by your administration and higher-ups** to actually stand on what they say we're supposed to be doing. It's kind of been that way for probably the last almost 10 years now." – GA woman, school counselor

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Educators Do Find Bright Spots In Their Jobs

Moderator: What is the best thing about your job?

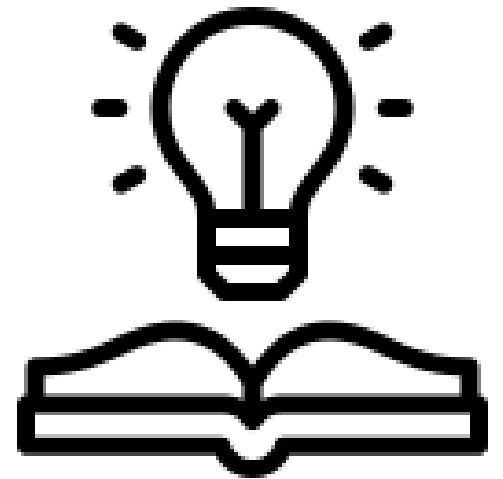
"I was a former classroom teacher, and then I became a counselor... Some of the challenges that I experienced as a teacher I don't experience in my setting now because it's a lot smaller. **Funding is there. We get a lot more support than I've ever gotten before.** For me, I don't endure a lot of the stressors that I used to when I was a classroom teacher. And I am in my own little utopia or bubble half the time." – GA woman, school counselor

"**I love working with children.** I've been working for 20 years in the teaching industry... I just loved it to see that I taught them something." – IL woman, teacher

"When I can see a kid achieve something that he didn't think he could achieve or he or she could achieve at the beginning of the year, and I see him do it. **Just seeing how proud they are of it.** One of the better things." – CA man, teacher

"My favorite part is breaking down those barriers. We grew up a little bit intimidated by special needs kids with the walkers and the non-verbal, but **seeing our kids be included in so many activities** is what I love the most." – NJ woman, speech language specialist

"I think that '**ahh I see**' or '**I get it**'—that moment when I see those. I'm just like, 'Yes, I did my job.' Or the smile on their faces when they didn't think they could do something and they have. Or with my students with disabilities, just the happiness of feeling included." – VA woman, special ed teacher



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Among Parents, Optimism In Elementary, Anxiety In High School

Moderator: Fill in the blank for me: I'm feeling [Blank] about the way things are going at my child's school these days

"Optimistic...I feel like the **school district is doing pretty well**, they're really good with making sure the kids are taken care of and making sure there's communication between the parents and look what their kids are doing in school." – PA woman, ES parent



"There's been **change in the principal** and I think that it's going to be a **positive change** as well as a new teacher, which I am very happy that he has. She's very good and I think that the teacher herself is going to improve my overall experience at the school." – CA woman, ES parent

"What's definitely good about the school [is] **we have music and art, so she loves those classes...** The teacher ratio, thank God, is about 18-1 so that's reasonable." – TX man, ES parent

"I'm kind of worried even though I'm confident in how I've raised him, but I still worry because **I don't want him to be negatively influenced.**" – NY woman, HS parent

"**Anxious...**I know that everybody is worried about violence and the only thing that worries me about it is **bullies**. It's always been an issue at school and it's always been since before. I don't know how to address that. I've been calling the school about it regarding to that issue with my daughter and it's been ongoing." – OR woman, HS parent

"You go and you look at students in other countries and you see how well they're doing and how well they're performing and I just **get worried that my son might not be able to compete** with what's out there and that's very, very worrying to me." – NY man, MS parent

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Some Worry Teacher Shortages And Large Class Sizes Leaving Students Behind

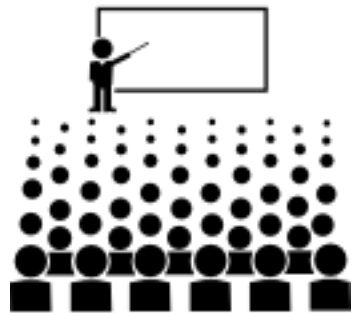
"My first thought, honestly, is the **people who have direct contact with the students are the first to be let go**. Anybody who can actually make a difference, because they're working directly with the students, they're the first on the chopping block, but yet our administration never gets hit." – NJ woman, speech language specialist

"They had one teacher and two teacher's aides [with] **32 kids**... Two kids bouncing all over the place is a bit much. But for me, 32 is just, I couldn't see it." - NY man, ES parent

"Knowing that there's **only one teacher and 24, 25 kids**, there's not a lot of one-on-one. You can't have one-on-one surveillance with everybody in the class that big with just one person." – MI woman, ES parent

"I hear they don't really pay attention to the kids that well, and that is very sad. So I have to stay on top of everything. Of the parents that I know, **we have to stay on top of everything, make sure we're there with the teachers. It's exhausting. Or they just get left behind.**" – FL woman, MS/HS parent

"Are they going to give that attention to her when she gets older? I don't know... Is she going to have that attention and that ability that she needs? And some of that is the teachers are **stretched thin because they have to handle behaviors**. They should be focused on other things." – CT man, ES parent



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Some Believe Technology Is Essential In Today's Classrooms, Others Fear It Hinders Critical Thinking And Problem-solving

"Students aren't actively learning. And I think the challenge is to keep up with the advancements in technology in addition to still trying to teach the students, but everything is so tricky, and students are all on social media, and **they're utilizing these tablets and computers. The academics don't necessarily feel like the priority.**" – PA woman, library associate

"I think [they should take] away the Chromebooks at school and **go back to actually having to communicate and stuff with each other.** I understand having to use them every once in a while. But I mean, she has to have it for every class, even for band, she has to have her Chromebook." – OH woman, MS parent

"I think that we have to prepare our kids for the real world, and that is the real world...**it's more important to embrace new technology** and prepare our kids to be successful in that environment." – NJ man, MS/HS parent

"What surprised me is just I noticed this last year that the shift of the whole class being onto technology, which they all have, so that is good, but it was just a shock to me. **Homework means sitting at my laptop with my daughter now.** But hey, that's all good. It's cool. It's just different." – TX man, ES parent

"At least in my school district, **every kid has a laptop.** And most work is done that way. They have no ability, very limited abilities, to problem solve, work with people, even communicate basic wants and needs. And we're talking general ed and the special education. **We've lost that personal interaction.**" – NJ woman, speech language specialist



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Many Said COVID Didn't Cause All The Problems But It Made Them Worse

"I know a big shift happened during COVID. That's when a lot of my fellow educator friends kind of left the profession. I was already gone by then. Because I actually left teaching and went to go do something else once I got during my master's time and then came back. Because I said, 'I can't teach anymore. I just can't do this.'" – GA woman, school counselor

"On the COVID impact, the school that he was going to, they were **already struggling with getting the kids be at grade level** and then **COVID came**, and that was just further delay in the progress of the educational aspect. There was just another delay." – NY man, MS parent

"Those students who **missed a lot of things, socialization and experiences in the pandemic** ... Depending upon where they started in their academics, you can see the change in those students and how they socialize and how they navigate. There was a real breakdown, a distinct one, there that I've noticed." – PA woman, library associate

"At my son's school, **absenteeism has been a very big challenge [post-COVID]**. There's so many kids that are absent... that was one of the concerns of the principal was that that was the only reason why we weren't getting some of the awards that schools receive was because of absenteeism." – CA woman, ES parent

"**Social connection, social skills**. I would say my daughter before COVID [had] been part of [the] basketball team and then all of a sudden it stopped. And then when she went back, she doesn't want to do it anymore." – OR woman, HS parent



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School Safety Is Top Of Mind For Parents

"I already know the marshal. I've said, I see him every day. He's a nice guy. He looks tough and he's cool and he is great with the kids, so I'm really glad that he's there." - TX man, ES parent

"School is supposed to be a safe place for your child to go to and it's just **uncertain with the violence.**" – GA woman, HS parent



"I'm always **praying that everything's well**, especially of course seeing your kid off to school, you obviously want to see them come back." – PA woman, ES parent

"**My main thing is safety.** So he started ninth grade and now I know there's the metal detectors and right now I'm grateful that he can use his phone." – FL woman, MS/HS parent

"Newtown is a half hour from me, so **the school shooter thing has not ever left my mind.** I've been able to have her here and have control over that. Now I got to put my faith in someone else who has to also divide their attention." – CT man, ES parent



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Cell Phones Get In The Way Of Learning And Socializing, But Parents Still Want Access To Their Kids

"I teach freshmen, but seeing them, **they would rather stare at their phones rather than have a conversation with the person next to them.** Let alone today, I had a student texting the student next to them about something, where I'm like, 'Guys, you're right next to each other. Have a conversation. Put the phones away.'" – PA man, teacher

"**My son spends like hours and hours on his phone and he just doesn't know how to properly communicate.** He says he has friends, but I look at him amongst his friends groups and they can stand hours just not talking to each other. They just look at their phones all day." – NY man, MS parent

"At my daughter's school, they've **completely blocked the signal.** So if there's any kind of emergency or anything, we're not going to have any kind of communication with our kids whatsoever." – OH woman, MS parent

"As long as they're not viewing anything that's inappropriate, I think [cell phones] should be allowed, especially because if they're turned off, **how are you supposed to communicate with them if you need to message them** after school or sometime during their lunch break or something?" – CA woman, ES parent

"I think it's kind of ridiculous that schools expect parents to be all right with them confiscating phones and stuff when **they clearly can't keep our children safe to begin with, and then they want to take away one tool from us that allows us to have some contact with them.**" – NJ man, MS/HS parent

"I'm on my phone constantly. I'll be the first to admit that at all points of the day. So I don't know what the answer is, **but from a safety perspective, I really like the idea of my student being able to contact me** or vice versa if something were seriously going on." – MI woman, ES parent



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Preparing Kids For Jobs, Building Social Skills, Instilling Love Of Learning Seen As Marks Of A Quality Education

"I hate teaching to pass an SOL. It's not about what the students actually retain. **We're teaching to pass the test, and that's it.**" – VA woman, special ed teacher

"I think one of the issues that I've noticed is the **stark lack of teaching about things like entrepreneurship, taxes, finance, debt, government, public speaking, investments, banking, internet security**, really things that every functioning adult should be emerging from government education knowing a lot about." – IL man, MS parent

"These kids, they can't communicate anymore. They can't talk, they can't listen. I just feel as though the school system hasn't adapted. It's great to learn about ancient China and all that stuff, but **we got to get into a little bit more modern and teach these kids how to communicate again** and what it takes to communicate." – MI man, MS/HS parent

"I think for my son specifically, I would like him to **actually learn things, not memorize.**" – CA woman, ES parent

"Teaching the **love of learning** first is at the heart of... If a teacher is able to do that, they have definitely done their job." – TX man, ES parent

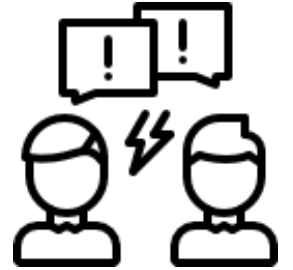
"There's certain things that they would learn that I don't consider the book learning, like **manners, sharing**. In a big group like that, those are skills that are only going to serve her later in life." – CT man, ES parent

"Something that allows a person to dive into adulthood, being either **completely prepared or almost completely prepared to deal with competition**, to deal with the various challenges that come either from being in the trades or going into university." – IL man, MS parent



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Educators Often Feel Undermined By Parents, Parents' Experiences With Teachers Vary



"I feel like the communication is really good with school this year." – MI woman, ES parent

"The teachers don't care. They literally don't care... These teachers here [in Georgia], they're in their 20s. You're fresh out of college." – GA woman, HS parent

"In some places in Texas, **some parents have declared war on teachers**. If you come from a school district that doesn't kind of toe the line of the conservative Texan, then you are seen as...potentially a problem. A lot of the parents come to you already finding you guilty of a crime you've not even committed or you may never even commit." – TX man, teacher

"It's a **very, very hard task** to go and teach 40 students in a classroom." – NY man, MS parent

"His teacher last year was standoffish. Communication was terrible with her. **This year, starting off very good.**" – MI woman, ES parent

"Our society has taken a turn in probably the last, I don't know, five, six years where **there's just no accountability for anything**...you go to the parents, and... it's never the kid's fault. Then they go to central office and complain." – VA woman, special ed teacher

"I think the total lack of any sort of responsibility by our educators, **everything is passed off onto the parents**...I have no confidence in any educator in my district whatsoever." – NJ man, MS/HS parent

"**They don't see the process. We're all in this together.** They're an equal part of this branch that has to work for this to work. And most of the times, they're not willing to pick up their piece to make this work." – GA woman, school counselor

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Parents And Teachers Don't Always Agree, But They Want Partnership And Communication



"I feel as though there's a disconnect from the school situation to the home life where we're not building that teamwork, or we're not building that, 'Hey, we all have the same goal of getting these kids to their future next step. How are we going to do it?'" – PA man, teacher

"There has to be collaboration with the teachers. I think that we also have our part to do, but the teachers also have their part." –NY man, MS parent

"I just feel like with communication, that's what's most important for me, that's how I feel my daughter is being well taken care of there and that I feel comfortable going to them." – PA woman, ES parent

"I would hope [parents] would see that their educators are struggling and therefore be a reinforcement and be a support and create a collaborative effort with their teachers to say, 'I have your back. I'm working at home to be a second support system to you as you educate my youth.'" – PA woman, library associate

"I think having good quality education means constant communication. Not only with me and the teacher, but also my child and myself." – TX man, ES parent



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Some Have Seen Impacts From Funding Cuts To Programs, Positions, And Extracurriculars

"I was a PE teacher forever, and they cut all the funding for elementary PE and then put me into middle school where I wasn't kind of qualified because I did something else for so long. I just see the overcrowding of some of the schools as well, but they just keep cutting funding. I see that as a big, big problem." – CA man, teacher

"Child study team in our school was reduced by 20% because of the funding. So they lost six people, one of whom was my son's IEP counselor." – NJ man, MS/HS parent

"They are closing the middle school I went to as a kid, but like I said, I'm in a rich district, but on the local news, I hear of many schools in South Dallas, which is generally speaking, the poorer area are getting shut down. And at the same time, it's hard to know. It is just not something we can easily figure out if it doesn't affect us directly." – TX man, ES parent

"They've cut back a lot of the funding. They used to have all of these after school programs for the kids that were fully paid for. They even provided transportation to and from the school. They've taken all of that away. And I mean, I think that those after school programs are even more so crucial for the middle school and the high school kids to get." – OH woman, MS parent

"My sister-in-law works in a larger city. She's taught the summer camp program for years and years, where they help students who just need help being caught up. They're trying to fill that gap. And they cut all but two teachers. Eight of them lost their job for the summer." – PA man, teacher

"The state of Georgia has decided that unfortunately in the county that I live in, that they're no longer going to fund school resource officers." – GA woman, HS parent



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Low Awareness Of The Republican Budget Impact On Education, But Parents And Educators Push Back On Medicaid, SNAP Cuts

"My parents were pretty irresponsible and I grew up on free school lunches and breakfasts. I am doing everything I can to not be like my parents and that does upset me because I mean, I ate every day. I **had breakfast and lunch at school. So it is a big deal to me. Even if I am independent leans Republican, I'm pretty upset by it.**" – TX man, ES parent

"[Cutting school meals would] be horrible because a lot of these kids—the parents aren't making them breakfast or rushing them out to school, and that's the only time they get to eat. Or they forget their lunch. Things like that happen. **If it's not free, I think that's going to hurt a lot.**" – CA man, teacher

"I can't abide by taking medical care away from children. I mean, I think it's despicable." – NJ man, MS/HS parent

"I think it **brings struggle to the inner city schools...** If it is cutting Medicaid, Medicare, housing, food stamps, free lunch and free breakfast, some inner city schools are already struggling... this bill... is only going to make it worse." – MI woman, ES parent

"I heard that they're **going to cut financial aid** to low-income students in college. They're going to cut their Pell Grant by \$2,000. And I don't think that's right because they're trying to get an education so they could better themselves." – IL woman, teacher

"It's not just a **slap in the face for the children** who are going to suffer, but the parents are stressed and suffering as well." – NY woman, HS parent

"I think this is a **big ugly bill** in my personal opinion. It's not beautiful at all with all of the issues that this is going to have, especially on the lower in class and middle in class families." – NY man, MS parent

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Parents And Educators Worry About Serving More Students With Special Needs

"We're supposed to tier and differentiate in the classroom, but then we are not allowed to differentiate the state tests that they're supposed to take....Then **these kids feel like failures at the end of the year because we put so much pressure on it.** Well, no wonder. And we're just pushing them through." – VA woman, special ed teacher

"It doesn't affect my daughter, but I know that **they're down a lot of paraprofessionals,** just in the district...and that's one of the big concerns that I have as she continues with them because they just don't have resources for such a vulnerable population." – CT man, ES parent



"My **son's special needs,** but he's not, he's mainstreamed, but the classes he would've been in a few years ago, they were **affected by funding cuts directly.**" – NJ man, MS/HS parent

"As somebody who deals with IEPs, [funding cuts mean] **there's probably just going to be more strain on students actually getting their services** because, oftentimes...parents are complaining that what is in their IEPs, the student isn't actually getting, and legally they should be....But I know, on the other side of it, we're not always staffed to be able to fully make sure those kids are getting the services that are in the IEPs." – GA woman, school counselor

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Many Parents And Educators Wary Of A New Voucher Program Impact On Public Schools

"I feel like if you're thinking about going to a private school, you probably already have some money to spend. **Why are you going to give them more when some of this money can go to the public schools to help?**" – CA man, teacher



"**Competition is good.** I can say that. I would want my kid to get this voucher and go to a private school. Who wouldn't want the better for their kids? I'm not going to sit here and act like I wouldn't take advantage of that." – CT man, ES parent

"I don't like [vouchers]. I think they're a way to decentralize the education system in the country and privatize it... **I pay \$13,000 a year in property taxes for my kids to go to public school, yours can go to public school too.**" – NJ man, MS/HS parent

"I know people that are **in private school that are unhappy** with the way that their kids are getting the education. So yeah, you could drive a Cadillac, but are you going to be happy at the end of the day? No. Half the time people are always upset like, 'Oh man, I drive a nice car but it's always under maintenance'....it just depends on the school system, private or public, how your child exceeds in school or what they're being taught in school. Doesn't necessarily have to be all private schools are the best at the end of the day." – TX man, ES parent

"You can shop at a Catholic or a private school with that voucher, but **those funds that you are taking are now coming out of that school district** because you're not going to school with them so your funding travels with you." – CT man, ES parent

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Parents And Educators Agree Children Are Worth The Investment, And Lament Ongoing Political Battles

Moderator: If you could (make one change to improve public education over night / send your elected officials a message about your public school), what would it be?

"The people above us that make the policies...they have JDs or different. They're politicians. They're not educators, but we follow policies that they make...**I think everybody needs to be educators in this, in education.**" – GA woman, school counselor

"[Elected officials] should **think of each kid as if they were one of their own.** I feel like that's the only way they'll understand what the children have to go through and what the parent has to go through on a daily basis." – TX man, ES parent

"The only magic wand I would create is something that will **bring people together because, if not, it's always going to be a battle of ideologies,** a battle of religion, a battle of conservative and liberal and all that." – TX man, teacher

"**Don't cut all the programs for the students,** especially those who have special needs, especially child with autism, child with ADHD and all that. They needed all those support specialists, all the psychologists, everything." – OR woman, HS parent

"[I would tell elected officials to **raise] the pay for the teachers.** I feel like that would be really great as well because I feel like teachers, they do so much for our kids and I really, really appreciate teachers. I always have. So maybe a pay raise that could help them and help the community, help them want to come to work and help our children and want to be there." – PA woman, ES parent

"**The people that care are the ones who should be in power making the decisions,** not the ones who don't care... it's very frustrating when you care and you want something to be better and it could be better, but they're working to do the complete opposite." – NY woman, HS parent

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About Navigator

In a world where the news cycle is the length of a tweet, our leaders often lack the real-time public-sentiment analysis to shape the best approaches to talking about the issues that matter the most. Navigator is designed to act as a consistent, flexible, responsive tool to inform policy debates by conducting research and reliable guidance to inform allies, elected leaders, and the press. Navigator is a project led by pollsters from Global Strategy Group and GBAO along with an advisory committee, including: Jessica Floyd, The Hub Project; Christina Reynolds; Mike Podhorzer; Jesse Ferguson, progressive strategist; Navin Nayak, Stephanie Valencia, EquisLabs; and Melanie Newman, Planned Parenthood Action Fund.

About the Study

GBAO conducted three online focus groups August 26, 2025 with educators and parents, specifically: public school educators, parents of public elementary school students, and parents of public middle and high school students.

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