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## FOCUS GROUP REPORT

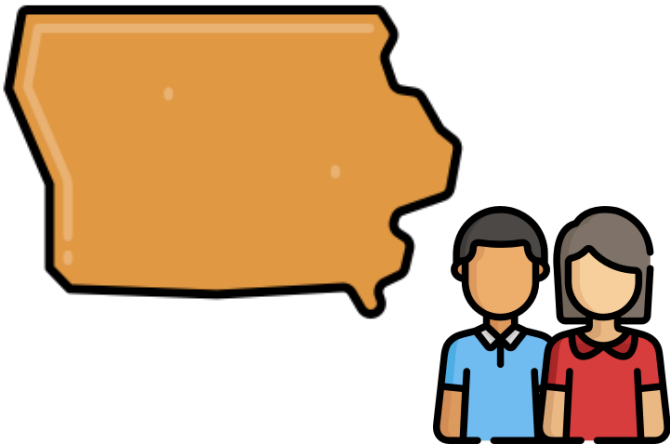
Tuesday, September 12, 2023

K-12 Parents, Students, and  
Teachers on the State of  
Education

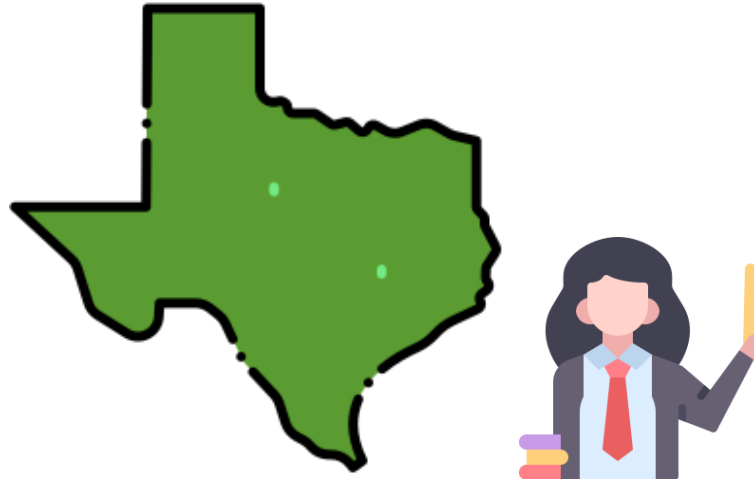


# Methodology

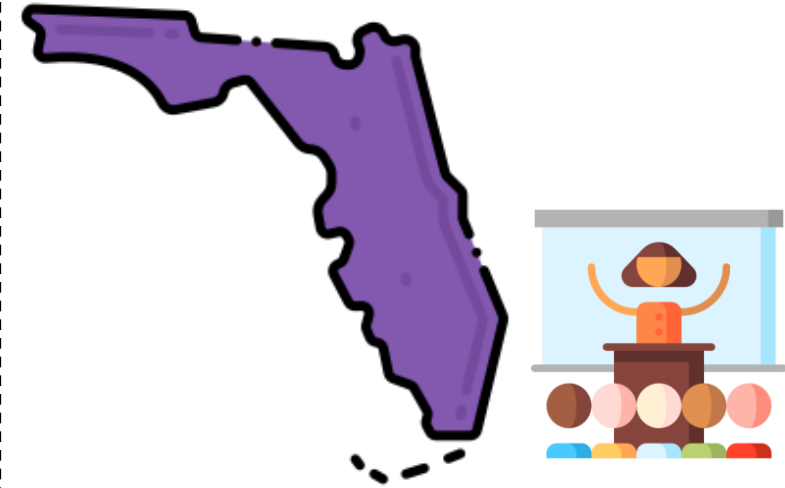
On August 30-31, 2023, GBAO conducted four focus groups – two online with Iowa parents and Texas teachers and two in person with Florida public high school students and teachers.



Iowa parents of K-12 public school students



K-12 public school teachers in Texas



High school students and K-12 public school teachers in Florida

# Key Takeaways

- Many parents feel good about their children's classroom, but educators and students express varied emotions.
- Participants—unprompted—discuss their priorities around school safety and cuts to education over “anti-wokeness.”
- Conservative policies like funding cuts, book bans, and cancelling classes are acutely felt.
- Messaging should touch key points around political divisiveness and government overreach, while—for some audiences—acknowledging transgender topics “are new.”
- PragerU videos are a shocking proofpoint.

# Parents' And Students' Views Toward One's Own School Widely Vary From "Anxious" to "Optimistic"

Moderator: Fill in the blank. I feel **blank** about the way things are going at my/my child's school.

"Fine." – FL student

"Confident." – IA mom

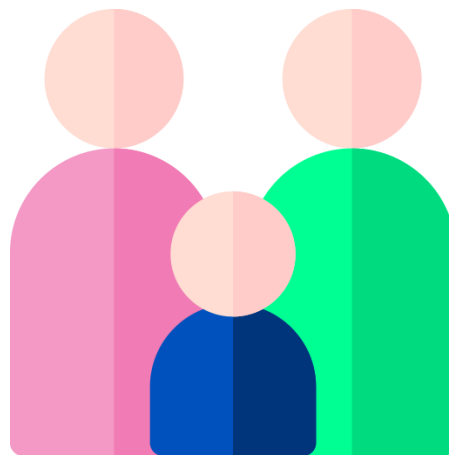
"Optimistic." – IA mom

"Terrified." – FL student

"Concerned." – FL student

"Good, but nervous." – IA dad

"Anxious." – IA dad



# Among Teachers, Views Vary From “Concerned” to “Encouraged”

Moderator: Fill in the blank. I feel **blank** about the way things are going at my school.

“Concerned.” – TX teacher

“Encouraged.” – FL teacher



“Sad.” – FL teacher

“Mixed emotions.” – FL teacher

“Exhausted.” – TX teacher

# More Parents Alarmed About Perceptions of Nationwide School Trends, Specifically Funding and School Safety



“[My] concern comes from a funding perspective. I'm concerned about how we're doing this in the state. I'm concerned about how, in the limited interactions I've had with educators in other states, there are a lot of inequities and I mean I'm fortunate to live in a relatively affluent school district, but others are very not that way.” – IA dad

“I think every year brings some nerves, but it was brought up by a few people. Funding, school shootings, things that your kids are being taught that you're not aware of, you just never know.” – IA mom



“I just hear a lot about teachers bragging about the things that they say to kids when their parents aren't around. Obviously, school shootings...” – IA mom

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# More Express Concern About Book Bans and Funding Cuts Than About Too Much “Woke” or “Indoctrination”

“It seems to be the push away from public school funding, and pushing it into private schools that are not, interestingly enough, don't have the testing requirements that the public schools have. **They seem to be wanting public schools to fail.**” – FL teacher

“If you don't want your kid reading a book, just, ‘Teacher, I don't want them reading this book.’ **I've had books on my shelves that the children love and now they're banned, I've had to pull them off my shelves.**” – FL teacher

“**Schools are so desperately underfunded and in my district;** we've got the kids on one side of the major highway who they're inside the loop so they aren't getting the same parent input, and then you've got the kids outside the loop [whose] parents have the money and so they have better resources.” – TX teacher

“**I help out with the library and seeing new books being banned every day,** having to give out more, get more books, take them away. Then I feel it's concerning that our literacy is an item that can be up for debate.” – FL student

[Moderator: what is a word to describe how schools are doing in the country today?] “I feel like it's kind of lacking, I guess, **going downhill a little bit. I think a lot of schools are lacking resources, both because of the book bans and also because of lack of funding.**” – FL student

“I'm seeing politically all the way up through the governor and some of the laws that are not exactly friendly to education, **making it easier to ban books and people objecting to things... It's fine if you object to it for your kids, but you shouldn't be objecting to it for my kids.**” – IA dad



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# In Fact, Many—Unprompted—Share Harrowing Stories About the Impact of Right-Wing Attacks

“At my school, if you want to be called something, you have to get a whole form signed and stuff, and I don't really think that's necessary. It's illegal if the teacher calls you a name that you're not. I don't think that should be necessary.” – FL student

“Right now, an ISD [independent school district] near where I work just passed a bylaw on the school that if a kid asks to be named in a different way or use a pronoun or they go to the teacher and open themselves and say, ‘Hey, I'm gay, lesbian, non-binary, or I feel that I'm trans,’ automatically you have to inform parents, inform [the] director. If not, you can be sued or taken out of your position.” – TX teacher

“Well, we can't have rainbows... Because rainbows symbolize something else.” – FL teacher

“I had a rainbow thing that said safe space on it, and I was told since I work with elementary students that I need to take it down.” – FL teacher

“... You see laws passing that say you have to have parental permission to use a nickname for your kid in this state. And schools had to ask, ‘What are we allowed to call your child?’ That's silly. That's a waste of school resources. That's a deliberate attempt to drain away from it. And it's this right-wing outrage over something that's not actually really happening to that degree.” – IA dad

“We had AP Psychology taken away in our school. And we asked our students, that's one of the best classes they've ever had.” – FL teacher

“I've had books on my shelves that the children love and now they're banned, I've had to pull them off my shelves.” – FL teacher

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# The Portrayal of Gender and Sexuality in the National Conversation Doesn't Fit Their Classroom Experience

"It just seems like the national level, you hear all the outrageous stories, but I haven't heard of any problems or issues or it taking away from school time here." – IA mom

"From my school, [hearing] next to none, from things through different media outlets, it's eye-catching now. People like to talk about it because people like to get mad about it." – IA dad

"They don't teach it in my school, but they're not allowed to." – FL student

"We can barely get your kid to sit down and not curse their neighbor out. If I could indoctrinate them to do anything, it would be to do their work and turn it in on time. **There's no gay agenda, whatever.**" – FL teacher



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# Teacher Pay and Social-Emotional Learning are Top Policy Priorities

*Read the following policies and pick the TWO you find most important.*

Messages	FL Students	FL teachers	IA Parents	TX Teachers	Total
Raising pay for teachers and school staff to ensure good teachers and school staff are retained.	8	6	4	3	21
Teaching essential life skills, known as Social-Emotional Learning, like communication, decision-making, and self discipline.	6	9	5	0	20
Improve STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) teaching so kids can compete for high-tech jobs.	0	4	2	0	6
Prevent schools from indoctrinating kids with woke ideas about race, sexuality, and transgenderism	3	1	0	1	5
Expand curricula to include the teaching of issues like racial and gender inequities	2	1	2	0	5
Make it harder to get guns, to minimize the chance of gun violence in schools.	1	0	0	3	4
Improve schools' mental health treatment and support for kids who need it.	0	1	1	1	3
Prevent nearly-grown men from participating in girls' sports, creating an unfair advantage.	0	0	0	2	2

# List of Policy Priorities Further Highlights Salience Of Teacher Pay & Curriculum are Over “Anti-Wokeism” With Educators

*Moderator: What makes you pick that policy priority?*

“... The state could just support teachers more. Most of the negative rhetoric that we're getting about education and public education especially is coming from our elected leaders. Then it trickles down to the voters who go to the school board meetings and say what they're going to say and sway those decisions, and **if they truly believe that education is important, then they need to show that they believe that by supporting education.**” – TX teacher

“I think teachers are underpaid. I think there's also a lot of teacher burnout. The expectations of teachers to work on a weekend sometimes is ridiculous. Or even lesson plans. I don't deal with all this stuff directly. I do, but I'm a PE teacher so I get paid ... I mean, I feel bad for all these teachers that have these core content and they have so much going down their throats of ‘Do this, do that, do that.’ I get a little bit and I'm like, ‘Really? What does this have to do with anything?’” – TX teacher

“[With regards to expanding curriculum] **One of the things that I love about education and people that learn is that the things that you don't know you are afraid of, that you don't understand, you're not being exposed, that's what you're afraid of.** So, whenever someone says, ‘Hey, this is like this, this happened, this is history, we will not repeat it,” and try to explain an educated worry, at least you stop being afraid of that and don't see it [as something] I don't want to be associated with. You start creating more... you start understanding.” – TX teacher

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# Parents and Students Agree That “Anti-Wokeism” is Not a Top Priority

*Moderator: What makes you pick that policy priority?*

“I think the one with the grown men being in sports, it just wasn't one of my top picks. I don't think that schools will improve the school itself or how my son is taught and raised at the school...” – IA dad



“Overall, though, there's a lot of things that need to be fixed in every single state. [The] main thing is **teachers getting paid more**. Teachers are so underpaid that now teachers are just walking out of classrooms after something minor happens to them.” – FL student

“I don't think things in school should be limited. **If someone wants to learn something, they should be able to learn whatever they want.**” – FL student

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# Politicians' Priorities Are Largely Mistrusted; They Are Too Far Outside the Classroom

"I feel disappointed because we have all these lawmakers making all these laws, policies, rules, and you have to do this. **They've never been in the classroom to know the reality of how it is actually going to work.** I mean, that's, I guess, frustrating and disappointing that the educators aren't more, I think, involved in what we really know. Expectations could be with these children no matter what age it is." – FL teacher

"I don't think politicians care anything about what's going on in the school. It all relates to votes." – FL teacher

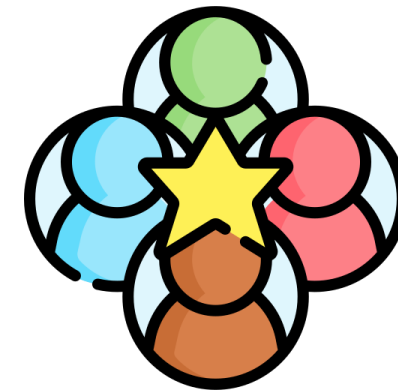
"We know what happens with our students. We know what we're going to benefit from. Rather than listening to someone who's not in a school and hasn't been in one since who knows when and probably didn't even go to a public school, **listen to the people who are actually going to be affected by this.** Hell, they could do a focus group with high school kids and be like, 'Hey, how do you guys feel about this?'" – TX teacher

"The further you get away from being a teacher or a parent yourself, the less you remember and the less you [know]..." – IA mom

"I think teachers should have more of a say [about] what students are learning, because I think of it, your state has its own government, right? And then there's the federal government, but **your state controls what's going on here. Your teachers should be controlling what's going on there. They know. They have more connections with the students.** They can have surveys like this where they talk to their students and learn more from them... People that haven't been to school in 50 years, why are they calling all the shots of what's going on here?" – FL student

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# Social-Emotional Learning is Highly Valued Across the Board, Seen as Addressing “Real Life” Skills



“I feel like it's just good to have going forward. You have to learn to communicate in your workplace and keep your temper in check even when you don't agree with somebody. I feel like having those skills prior to when you need them to get a job will essentially speed up the process and help everybody out.” – IA dad

“I see it as kids spend so much time on their cell phones nowadays. They need some life skills to be able to communicate effectively with their peers and with their future bosses, employers.” – IA dad

“My younger brother has an IEP and stuff, and so certain things that he could have learned younger, maybe more social skills, I feel like would've helped him more. But I also think certain life skills like financial and stuff like that and financial aid for college and stuff like that should be added because I feel like that's kind of needed to help people, maybe like first generation or don't really have experience with that.” – FL student

“If we just took a step back, especially at the elementary school level, take a step back, teach them those social skills, then I think academically they'd be more able to be successful so when they get to the secondary level, there's not as many issues.” – TX teacher

“From my position, that's kind of my insight. I feel like when we talk about the whole child and you take academics out of it, some of these kids, especially these COVID babies, don't know how to manage their emotions, how to simply take turns, just communicate... Just some basic human skills are severely lacking in these kids.” – FL teacher

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# Most are Aware of New Laws Affecting the Classroom and Believe They are Part of a Larger Religious or Political Agenda

"...It seems like our governor, Ron DeSantis, is trying to take a radical position on his political beliefs because he wants to run for president." – FL student

"I kind of go to a smaller school, and so it's kind of run by people with a lot of family values and stuff. It's not technically a religious school, but a lot of times it feels like the stuff imposed is more religious than it needs to be..." – FL student



"...The taking [of] the public money to fund private schools, it should be considered unconstitutional under both the Iowa Constitution and the Federal Constitution because they are using federal or state public tax money to pay for religious education. And that is explicitly against the Iowa Constitution and against the idea of the Bill of Rights. It shouldn't be allowed." – IA dad

"I think that there are a group of elected officials that are trying to make news and they're trying to make news for their own gain, be it reelection or the next election." – IA dad

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# Resonant Messaging Against Conservative Attacks on LGBTQ+ Community: “Divisiveness” and “Overreach”

“... A lot of politicians almost weaponize issues around a marginalized group as a way to get votes rather than just talking about people because they're concerned. They're using it as a way to spin the election a bit.” – FL student

“... Politicians are using transgender kids as just a political move, political leverage rather than to help our schools. The way that it says, ‘It's a way to win votes and divide people,’ when it really should just be about helping those kids get the resources that they need.” – FL student

“I think that what these laws do is overreach and trying to legislate every possible option out of the way.. It's overreach. It's governmental overreach, in my opinion.” – IA dad

“... It's very concerning that there's policies being placed now that... the voucher kind of thing, that they're going to give a voucher so you can go to a private school that is more [religious].” – TX teacher

“The politicians just need to stop exploiting all that nonsense.” – FL teacher



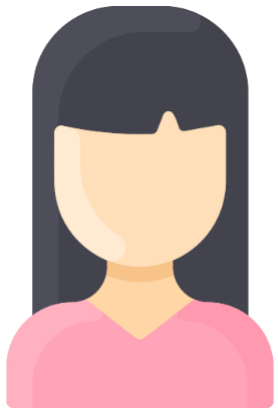


# Some, However, Wonder if Young Children are Exposed to LGBTQ+ Issues Prematurely

“Everyone's worried about actual classes of, like physiology stuff and other classes like that. I just don't really see it too often. But if we were talking about [the] county itself, there's really no need really for elementary kids to be seeing all this. Maybe high school kids, sure, why not.” – FL student



“I think that children should not have a sexual identity because children are not having sex. I don't know why we talk about it at school. I mean children, like elementary children, I think we should be discouraging talking about sex at school.” – IA mom



“I feel like the older you get, the more a hundred percent you be you. But when you're in that elementary school and you're still trying to figure out who you are, I think there's a line somewhere there. I can't tell you where it is, but yeah, some kids know earlier than others, but you just got to put a line there, I think.” – IA dad

# Much Less Division Around Discussions of Race; Most See These Policies as Politically-Motivated

“And I've seen a lot of books that are more geared towards Black people's success being taken out of schools so young kids can't read that stuff. And how are they supposed to know that they're capable of doing that?” – FL student

“I feel like since there's a different political party at the national scale right now at President, it's kind of like our governor's way of like saying like he's not going to follow it and kind of just passing these laws almost like kind of like a pawn, which kind of is frustrating because it's not really in the best interest of the constituents, it's more just in the best interest of the governor.” – FL student

“I don't feel like some of these laws, they shouldn't happen. I don't feel like it's that big of a deal, especially the African-American studies. Like, I just don't see why you would remove it, why it's not doing nothing. I feel like you can take the class if you want or don't.” – FL student

“It reminds me that when I was in high school, I took AP European History. How come I was allowed to take AP European history, and you're not allowed to take AP African American History? Seems biased.” – FL teacher

“I can't believe that our governor really feels that way. I just refuse to believe it that he really feels that slavery was good for Black people.” – FL teacher

“They're focusing on the wrong things... This is history, we can't change that. They need to know about that. Again, to just have learned to know our culture, our world, our country, and to take that away as simply sad, sad.” – FL teacher

“I feel that it's more a political kind of situation... Then I think of the agenda that is trying to push and trying to create this new generation that do not know the history or they don't want to know or they want to erase reality. At the ultimate, if you stop creating critical thinkers, you just create people that work and that's it. I think that is what is being poached maybe.” – TX teacher

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# Florida Educators and Students Aware of PragerU Content; Both Videos are Shocking

[About the "Embrace Your Femininity" video] "It's like the 1950s." – FL teacher

"This feels like indoctrination." – FL teacher

"I don't even know what to say... At first, I didn't understand what they were doing. Then I'm like, 'Okay, they're telling us it's good to be. You shouldn't be in between, you should be male or female.' But then you want to embrace it. Then it says, 'Be kind to yourself and others,' but the underlying tone is, 'No. If you want to be a tomboy or whatever, you can't be that. You should be more feminine.' Then it got me on, 'God created your smile.' I'm not used to seeing stuff like this, so both videos just flabbergasted me. I'm just not used to it being thrown in my face..." – FL teacher

"It almost feels like it's a parody video... Like it's not real." – FL teacher

"They've come out and said they're indoctrinating the youth. Prager has stated that is their goal... that youth is the future, and it's very Hitler-y sounding, let me tell you..." – FL teacher

"My history teacher showed us a Christopher Columbus one because he thought it was really stupid." – FL student

"I'm not going to lie, it came up on TikTok." – FL student

[Frederick Douglass video] "I think it is one-sided... And I feel like some of the information, at least from this video, it's just kind of wrong. It's not really historically accurate based on if you look at other perspectives, and history shouldn't be something to where it's all different perspectives. If we're teaching it in schools, then it should be kind of the unbiased point of view, and I don't think that this is very unbiased about it at all." – FL student

"I feel like so many people have so many different religious beliefs. That most beautiful thing that God created was a woman's smile, that just kind of feels outdated to me, I feel like, and just kind of not something that we need to be putting in people's minds... I just don't think that it's necessary to push that tiny little bit of religion..." – FL student

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# Students are Uniquely Articulate Around Issues of Gender

“The idea of embracing femininity is a great idea, but how they went to describe it, they were dogging on that girl that doesn't accept gender norms. And it's like why? And it showed her in a bad light. It's like she's a woman too. Why do they have to be a certain way?” – FL student

“... Smiling isn't just a feminine trait. And then it also begs the question, what is femininity? Because they didn't really define it very well. And in my opinion, it's subjective, it's entirely subjective. I mean, femininity is according to what you define it as because, in my opinion, wearing a dress isn't necessarily feminine and someone else might disagree with me. It's just such an up in the air thing that it's, a video describing how to be feminine is not going to be very effective.” – FL student

“Relating happiness to femininity takes away from people who are more masculine and prefer to be more masculine. And it's really weird that they would present it like that, as if only people who are feminine can be happy... It's not fair to people who are more masculine and prefer to present themselves that way. How is it fair to them that it undermines their emotions? And I feel like that kind of feeds into the first one about not feeding into stereotypes. It's such a stereotype for men not to present their emotions, or more masculine people and not to present their emotions. But now it's kind of feeding into that stereotype of, well, men can't smile and light up a room, but a woman could. That's really weird.” – FL student

“My mom has told me stories when she was in the workplace and how telling a woman to smile, smile has been used to her be like a sexist act. That whole phrase, telling a woman to smile, has become this whole poster, this is the iconic sexist thing to do. And it's like, why are you telling kids, high school, middle school, elementary school girls, ‘Hey, smile?’ That's just introducing sexism to them so early on in their lives, which is horrible.” – FL student

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# Respondents Would Show Their Governor Diverse Student Bodies, Safety Lockdowns, and Thinned-Out Libraries

"I live in a big, by a lot of metrics, very successful academic school district... And I would like to show her because it's very clear that Iowa City and Des Moines were at odds with the governor's office for a lot of things, I'd like to show her how well it's going in my district." – IA dad

"Probably just have him sit in on, I think there's a gay straight alliance club at my school, have them sit in on a meeting like that and listen to the students at that school talk about their lives and talk about what's going on with them and how these new school policies are affecting them and have them listen from the source." – FL student

"I would show him the clubs that my students ... or not just my students, but the students on our campus have created. We had students and I'm actually the sponsor [of] our mental health club. We had students who started a Pride club, we have an international club, and these were the kids who came to teachers and said, 'Hey, can you sponsor this club? Because we really want to do it.' Just seeing how you've got all of these groups that are currently othered and being targeted, that on a high school campus, these kids are getting together and they're like, 'Hey, we got to stick together, but we also need to show everybody else who we are and what we are.'" – TX teacher

"I'd like to have him go into my school's library and just see how many shelves are empty and how many books are missing now. Because my school just got our library started up, it took students the whole summer to get it organized and then they passed this, and now they've had to go through every single book and look for what they have to look out for and remove those books. It's just really sad to see some of the empty shelves." – FL student

"I would show him the diversity of our school that there's everything and nothing seems different... I would say, 'And we all get along,' and that's the beauty of it. Not until politicians come and not until we start talking about racism or how we should be or who's not this, that, what's in, what's out, doesn't matter." – TX teacher

"... Going through an actual lockdown with my son in the classroom standing at the door with scissors, and ready to fight for my child and my students was a harsh reality." – FL teacher

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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, EMILY's List; Mike Podhorzer, AFL-CIO; Jesse Ferguson, progressive strategist; Navin Nayak, Center for American Progress Action Fund; Stephanie Valencia, EquisLabs; and Melanie Newman, Planned Parenthood Action Fund.

## About the Study

GBAO conducted four focus groups on August 30-31, 2023– two online with Iowa K-12 public school parents and Texas K-12 public high school teachers, and two in-person with Florida high school students and Florida K-12 public school teachers. Some quotes have been lightly edited for brevity. Qualitative results are not statistically projectable.

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