



National Survey of Traditional Public  
& Charter School Parents

# What Really Matters to Parents



NATIONAL COALITION FOR  
PUBLIC SCHOOL OPTIONS

# Background



Before the introduction of public school options like charter schools and open enrollment programs, the decision about which school a student would attend was largely dictated by public officials and a student's geographic residency. However, with the arrival of school choice options more than 25 years ago, it was intended that parents would choose where their child attends school based on the student's needs. Additionally, that parents' assessment of the school's success in meeting their children's needs would be the basis for holding schools accountable.

In today's education policy landscape, public officials are increasingly supplanting their judgements for those of parents by imposing their preferred criteria to assess whether or not a school is successful. Public officials' criteria often focuses heavily on a school's standardized test scores, not on the criteria valued by parents.

Seeking to better understand these criteria, the National Coalition for Public School Options, an organization that promotes the rights of parents to choose the school that best meets their student's learning needs, commissioned a comprehensive national study to gain insights from parents exercising their right to choose.

## Topics examined in the study were:



What criteria do parents consider when deciding to exercise school choice?



What criteria, academic and non-academic, do they take into account when choosing a school?



What criteria do parents use to assess a school's quality?



What criteria do parents use to assess whether a school is succeeding or failing?

**The study's findings were clear: the criteria identified by parents as important when assessing if a school is the right fit for their students are not the criteria used by policymakers when assessing a school's overall quality and performance.** In fact, while both parents and policymakers value academic progress and achievement, parents put far more emphasis on student-centric qualitative criteria, such as school safety, a positive, bully-free learning environment and access to quality teachers, which standardized test scores do not take into account.

# Methodology

The National Coalition for Public School Options conducted four focus groups with charter school parents in Detroit and Atlanta and conducted an on-line survey of 1,000 public and charter school parents nationwide.

The survey has a margin of error of +/- 3.10%.



## Key Findings

Charter and traditional public school parents view criteria for determining school quality more similarly than different, caring most about school safety and teacher quality. They also wanted more information than just standardized test scores in determining the quality of a school.

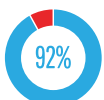
When deciding which school to send their child to, both groups of parents ranked having a safe learning environment and quality teachers as most important. Among the least important was a school's standardized test scores.

Traditional public school parents believe that charter schools provide a better education and a majority would send their child to a charter school if they had that option.

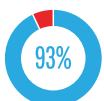
Of note, among African American parents surveyed, 52% said public schools in their communities were headed in the wrong direction.

### Parents' views on the important criteria they need to determine where to send their child to school:

#### Top 3



Safe learning environment



Quality of teachers



Positive learning environment

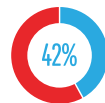
#### Bottom 3



Location/proximity of school

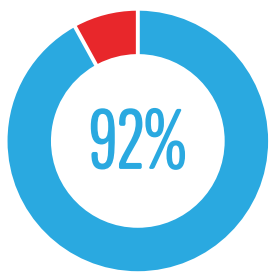


Schools' scores on standardized tests



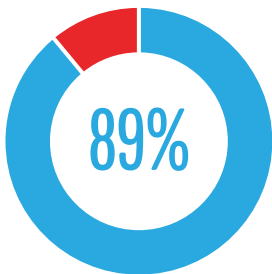
School recommended by friend/parent

## Survey Results

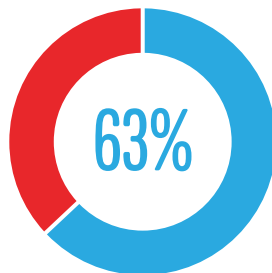


### School Safety

92% of parents said a school with a safe learning environment is an important criteria in determining where to send their child to school, with 73% saying it is “extremely important”



89% of parents said a school with a safe learning environment – free from bullying and assaults – is an important indicator of a schools’ success or failure, with 61% saying it is “extremely important”



63% of parents said it was “extremely important” that schools in their community are safe – the top-ranked criteria



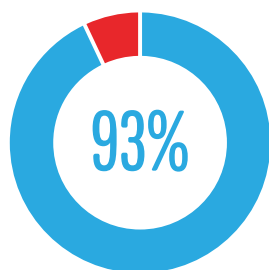
“Public charter schools give parents more choices. To be able to put my child where I want him to go to school, rather than put him in a school and pray that he is safe.” – (Male/Florida)

“My child currently attends charter school and it has made a world of difference... More activities and less bullying.” – (Female/Utah)

“There is more freedom for children to learn in the public charter my children attend. They are happy and not exposed to bullying and violence.” – (Female/California)

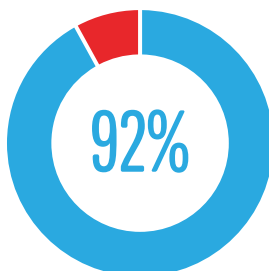


# Survey Results

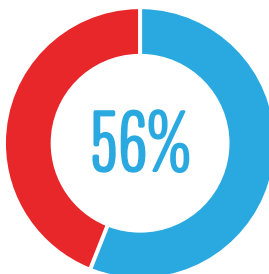


## Teacher Quality

93% of parents said the quality of teachers is an important criteria in determining where to send their child to school, with 70% saying it is “extremely important”



92% of parents said the quality of teachers is an important indicator of a schools’ success or failure, with 66% saying it is “extremely important”



56% of parents said it was “extremely important” that schools in their community have quality teachers



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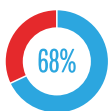
**“The high quality of teachers can lead students to develop correctly.”**

– (Male/California)



## Survey Results

# Standardized Tests and School Accountability



68% of parents said their child's attitude toward attending school matters more to them than their test scores



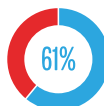
59% of parents said they want to see more information than just standardized test scores before deciding where to send their child to school



43% of parents said a school's average on standardized test scores should not be considered at all in determining if a school is a success or failure



25% of parents said the school's standardized test scores were "extremely important" in determining where to send their child to school



61% of parents believe charter schools should be held to the same academic standard as traditional public schools

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“ Schools tend to teach according to standardized tests instead of teaching what children would use every day in life. They also want every student to learn the same way when everyone learns differently.” – (Female/Wyoming)

“ Holding different schools up to different standards diminishes the idea of a standard.” – (Male/California)

“ If both are educating our children, both should have the same standard. Using a higher standard would bias a school against accepting special needs students who often perform on a lower level than their peers.” – (Female/Pennsylvania)



## Conclusion

Overwhelmingly, parents view school safety, free from threats of physical or emotional harm, as the most important criteria when choosing a school for their child. They also highly value the quality of teachers.

State standardized test scores as a measure of a school's quality or success or failure is not an important criteria to parents. Rather, they value their child's attitude toward attending school as more important.

Parents believe schools – whether charter or traditional public – should be held to the same standards.

The study findings suggest that public officials are not adequately incorporating the criteria important to parents when assessing school performance.



NATIONAL COALITION FOR  
PUBLIC SCHOOL OPTIONS

The National Coalition for Public School Options (PSO) is a national alliance of parents that supports and defends parents' rights to access the best public school options for their children. The coalition supports the creation of public school options, including charter schools, online schools, magnet schools, open enrollment policies, and other innovative education programs.



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