



Florida Education Association Survey: Executive Summary

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February 21, 2022

Executive Summary

Methodology

Using a national calling center, Clearview Research conducted interviews with a sample of 750 registered Florida voters, 300 of which were parents of children in public school. The survey was conducted from Monday, February 7, through Sunday, February 13, during evening hours.

The composition of respondents took into account current registration in an attempt to make the final sample “look like” the state’s registered voter population. As such, the sample was balanced by gender, party, race, and region in order for our distribution to be consistent and similar to the actual registered population.

The sample is both random and representative, yielding a general response set with a margin of error of + 5.64 at the 95% confidence level.

Previous polls referenced included a February 2021 poll conducted interviewing 600 respondents (made of parents and non-parents) and an August 2021 poll conducted interviewing 800 likely voters.

Overview

The findings from this most recent poll conducted for the FEA show an erosion in how the general public feels on how our public schools are doing educating our children during the pandemic. But this erosion, it is vital to note at the onset, is largely driven by those who do not have children in public school. While there has been some modest slippage among parents, it is critical to note that non-parents are likely receiving information about the matter from media and other sources and not from in-school experiences. With a massive near 20-point differential, it is clear that those who touch and feel Florida’s public schools almost daily have different experiences and therefore different opinions than what is being conveyed by others.

What is perhaps equally as notable in these findings is that the public sees this rancor and the disruptions in our schools, but they also see that teachers and other education professionals are the tip-of-the-spear in the public education realm. Thusly, they believe with increasing intensity that teachers deserve higher pay and in particular that experienced teachers deserve it as well. In short, their respect and appreciation for teachers/educators and staff has grown during the pandemic. This could also be driven by the very real and unavoidable fact that Florida is suffering an historic teacher shortage with over 4,000 vacancies in the middle of the current school year, and that is being felt on the ground.

The second set of important findings have to do with their opinions related to some of the cultural issues being considered. For ease of consideration, we have divided these into two distinct categories: the first being about

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how we teach history and the second being how we address gender, gender identity and sexual orientation in the classroom.

On the former issue, how we teach history, the public overwhelmingly supports teaching all of history with the good and the bad about America's past, and they want teachers to have a great deal of leeway in how they teach these subjects. They prefer local control over state control. While they generally believe parents should have a say in the curriculum, they overwhelmingly oppose allowing parents to sue if they disagree, and the public strongly opposes allowing a small group to intervene in the process.

On the gender and sexual preference issues the public is a more divided and less supportive of offering leeway.

From the above there are two important observations:

- ▶ Even though there is across-the-board support for most of the above, there is a significant group of outliers (between 10 and 20 percent) who want nearly complete control of the curriculum and oppose teaching all of history (both the good and bad) and also oppose the teaching of any sexual content in schools. While more than 9 in 10 feel this small group should not hold sway, they do represent perhaps the squeakiest of wheels at the local level and clearly have influence among key political figures.
- ▶ The public at-large is not settled in their opinions on these issues (as they are on some of the larger issues of the day; issues like abortion rights, gun control, the death penalty and other heavily discussed "mature" issues). This can be evidenced by the seemingly inconsistent replies where, for example, almost every respondent agreed that children should learn both the good and bad from history even if it makes the child feel uncomfortable, yet more than one in three feel that "controversial subjects around race and racism" should not be taught at all. This speaks to a lack of clarity as well as a lack of tribal adherence/understanding on these topics.

General Findings

When reviewing these findings and especially when considering changes from a prior similar poll, it is vital to first see where there are consistencies between the two. This is done to check sample stability. In this regard, we feel very comfortable that we have a very stable sample in both in that several key indicators remained largely unchanged, and this is especially important on issues where we shouldn't expect much change. For example:

- ▶ There was no change whatsoever in their opinion of the FEA, which remained a solid 50/26 favorability ratio.

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- ▶ There was no statistical difference on their opinions of the Florida Legislature with a net 4-point differential in favorability rating between the two polls.
- ▶ There was no significant change in their worry about children falling behind in their studies during the pandemic.
- ▶ On the misuse of state standardized tests (an issue which has not really been discussed publicly in the past year), there was no statistically significant difference in the two polls.
- ▶ Paying teachers more grew, but only by 4 points, also not statistically significant (and frankly, it is hard to move this number as it was already very high at 89% agreement).

But, in this circumstance, when you see differences, you know those represent actual shifts in public opinion and are not the result of methodology differences between the two polls. The significant shifts in the past year are:

- ▶ The public no longer feels that our public schools are doing a good job of educating students during the pandemic. Last year a majority felt the schools were doing a good job, but that number has dropped by a very large net 26 points and now only 38% feel that way. The largest shift came from GOP women, but all GOP and “NPAs” were close behind. Democrats are also underwater but not by as much of a margin.
- ▶ Raising the salaries of experienced teachers also grew significantly with a net 9-point shift. But, most notably, the extreme support position for this notion jumped an astonishing 20 points!
- ▶ Support for the governor also shifted with his “very favorable” rating up 9 points for a net +13.

But in looking at the numbers related to the decline in public opinion on how schools are educating through the pandemic we saw several interesting – and telling – data points.

First, we know that the downward pull on public opinion in regards to many general issues is being driven by external factors unrelated to public schools, namely the ongoing pandemic, supply chain issues, inflation and other related factors. This offers a generally negative set of “trade winds” impacting most issues related to government services and such.

Second, media-driven conversations about our schools inspired largely by the governor’s unrelenting and very public assault on some public school districts is having a more direct and noticeable impact.

How can we be so sure?

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- ▶ There were minimal changes from the last poll from parents: Those who have actual experience in schools and see first-hand what is happening and are therefore less likely to be swayed by public rhetoric.
- ▶ The differences between parents and non-parents is stark with a near 20-point gap. This clearly means, that those who are not necessarily directly involved with schools are hearing the chatter and the media clamor and assume things are bad and getting worse.
- ▶ Democrats went the opposite way of the governor, and GOP respondents went with the governor, suggesting there are partisan trade winds and as his popularity grows, his influence among his supporters also grows.

When it comes to teachers/educators/staff and pay we see something quite surprising.

It appears that the public (both parents and those who do not have children in public schools) have hardened their support for paying educators more. They seem to understand that our state has a dire teacher and staff shortage and that it is those who work in our schools every day are doing the best they can, are dealing with increasingly difficult situations and are persevering through it all. That is why support for a general pay increase went up 4 points and why for experienced teachers support grew a net 9 points (with a dramatic 20-point shift in the extreme support position) with nearly three in four (73%) indicating “strong” agreement with the statement that, “We should raise the salaries of experienced teachers and not just the brand new ones.”

Where do parents and non-parents differ?

On most issues, parents and non-parents tend to be aligned. For example, both strongly agree that “we cannot let a small group...divide parents and teachers” with 90% support from each. Similarly, when asked if, “We need to teach our children both the good and bad from history and current events to prepare them to be well-informed and independent thinkers, even if it makes some people feel uncomfortable,” exactly 93% in both groups also agreed and when it comes to teacher pay, both are in overwhelming agreement that pay increases are warranted. And, restricting classroom discussions on subjects like race, same-sex marriage, gender identity etc. also finds agreement. Both feel restricting these conversations is a bad idea by a margin of greater than 2:1.

But what is telling about the current dialogue is where they disagree at a level that is both large (more than a 10-point differential) and statistically significant.

Parents are more likely to be more negative relative to the FEA position on the following. The negative differential is in parentheses after each. It is important to keep in mind that non-parents are 11 points less favorable towards Ron DeSantis in general, so these differences cannot be explained by partisan skewing:

- ▶ Favorability of the FEA (-19)
- ▶ Making school board elections partisan (-19)
- ▶ Do you think that the public schools are doing an excellent, good, only fair, or poor job of educating students during the coronavirus pandemic? (-18)
- ▶ Parents and teachers should be on the same team and a new law allowing parents to sue teachers because the parents do not like a book that is being used, or disagree with the content of a specific course, will hurt our public schools. (-17)
- ▶ Parents should have more control (-14)
- ▶ How worried are you that teachers bring their political views into the classroom (-11)
- ▶ We should raise the salaries of experienced teachers, not just the new ones (-10)

Finally, non-parents are 11 points more worried than parents that children are falling behind in their studies due to the pandemic. This last data point of course speaks to the concept introduced above that those who see the actual school experience are more positive than those who do not.

Differences between teaching racial history and discussing topics dealing with gender identity and expression.

It appears that the public is aligned by a 2:1 margin with the FEA on matters relating to teaching both the good and bad about American history. More than 60% feel controversial subjects related to racism should be taught in public schools and over 9 in 10 feel, “We need to teach our children both the good and bad from history and current events to prepare them to be well-informed and independent thinkers, even if it makes some people feel uncomfortable” and a similar amount felt that we cannot let a small group dictate these policies.

However, on gender and gender expression issues, there is somewhat less support with a majority (54%) saying these subjects “should not be taught at all”.

An unanchored public on the hot-button issues of the day

As noted above, the public does not yet have fully formed opinions on many of the hot topics of the day. For example, on one hand they overwhelmingly agree (73%) that the Florida Legislature is over-reaching on these subjects, but yet, a majority (54%) want to see the teaching of gender, sexual preference, gender identity issues barred from being taught at all and slightly more than one-third (35%) also don't want difficult racial issues being taught. And while a whopping 90% say that a small group should not dictate policy, more than 20% think people should be able to sue if their child is uncomfortable, while a third think we should expand the role that parents can play in having books banned.

But about teacher pay

While the public is whip-sawed on many of these issues, have a declining faith in how schools are handling the pandemic, and are split on how we should deal with racial and gender-related issues, the one thing they strongly agree on is paying teachers and related personnel more, and, in particular, paying more experienced teachers more so “Florida can have stronger and better schools.”

It is rare in these times to find a unifying message and a unifying concept that brings people together, especially on complicated matters like parental control, school curricula and how to deal with sensitive subjects. But in this regard the matter is crystal clear: the public is crying out for better pay for those who work in our public schools every day.