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Media Contact:

Jason Amos

jamos@nsba.org

703-838-6719

New Poll Reveals Voter Attitudes About Public Schools During the Pandemic

Voters Cite Broadband Access as a Priority, Call for Increased Investments

Alexandria, VA – Coming out of a year when millions of students learned remotely from their homes, voters are very aware of the need for students to have internet connectivity. In fact, nearly two-thirds of voters say that a lack of adequate broadband and internet access outside of school buildings was an important issue to address, according to a new poll released today by the National School Boards Action Center (NSBAC).

Student access to the internet was a priority for voters across a wide variety of demographics and political parties, with 89 percent of Democrats and 73 percent of Republicans seeing easier access to technology and broadband as important. These numbers suggest that closing the digital divide in education for students that lack home connectivity, commonly called the Homework Gap, is an essential priority for voters.

The poll reveals voters' attitudes about their children's educational experiences during the pandemic across race, regions, and political parties. It also conveys the challenges—and opportunities—voters see facing public schools. Findings from the poll were presented during the National School Board Association's (NSBA) Advocacy Institute, broadcast online to hundreds of school board members nationwide.

"The COVID-19 pandemic thrust the American education system into the public eye like never before," said Anna Maria Chávez, Executive Director and CEO of the National School Boards Association. "As a result, every American has a much better understanding of the critical role that local public schools play in our society. Schools not only provide instruction, they provide safe places for students to go while their parents are at work. They provide meals, counseling, and other social services on which many families depend. Now, as we emerge from the pandemic, parents and non-parents alike are keenly aware of the challenges facing public education—and they are looking to our elected officials to address them."

According to the poll, local public schools remain popular among voters but there is a demand for more investment and resources to help them. In addition to internet connectivity, voters also believe learning loss among students due to the COVID-19 pandemic is a key priority, with 88 percent saying it is a problem, including 65 percent who say it is a "very big" problem. Other issues selected as priorities by voters include ensuring schools are safe (88 percent say it is important that we address this issue); providing students with real-world skills (81 percent say it is a problem); a lack of personalized learning focused on individual needs (74 percent say it is a problem); and a lack of quality teachers (83 percent say it is important that we address). Strong support on providing students with real-world skills and

concern over a lack of personalized learning suggest voters are focused on the future and modernization of public schools beyond the pandemic.

“Voters across all demographics and voting patterns understand that the pandemic dramatically impacted our nation’s public schools,” said Celinda Lake, a Democratic pollster who also conducted the poll. “But they also recognize public schools need to be future focused and have the resources to better prepare students for success. There is broad support for addressing the biggest challenges facing education. For example, voters across race, region, and political party all see learning loss as a ‘very big’ problem, including 71 percent of Republicans, 71 of African Americans, and 71 percent of Latinos. What is also striking is the broad and strong support for improving access to broadband and technology.”

Voters also favor increased funding for education to address these priorities—even if it means an increase in taxes. Overall, 59 percent of voters think funding for public schools should be increased. Of those who believe funding should be increased, 86 percent would support an increase in funding even if it meant they would pay more in taxes.

When asked if taxpayer dollars are better spent on school vouchers or improving public education, 61 percent of voters say it is better to allocate funds to improving public education and schools, compared to only 18 percent who support vouchers to pay for students to attend private or religiously affiliated schools.

Regarding the obstacles their local school districts faced during the pandemic, the largest obstacle, named by 66 percent of voters as challenging, was having quality broadband and internet access at home to attend school online.

“The skills students need to succeed are changing,” said Lydia Tedone, NSBAC President and member of the Simsbury Public Schools Board of Education in Connecticut. “Even before the pandemic, millions of students nationwide struggled to keep up because they lacked reliable internet access at home. We must invest in broadband connectivity so that no students and communities are left behind, during the pandemic and beyond.”

“Voters believe easy access to technology and broadband is very important with incredibly high numbers—89 percent of Democrats, 73 percent of Republicans,” said Republican pollster Bob Carpenter part of the bipartisan team who conducted the poll. “If I were a policy maker I would be running to the front of the line to address that issue.”

Other issues facing local school districts named by voters were teachers having access to adequate resources and support to effectively teach their students virtually (65 percent of voters say this was challenging); students having access to counseling and mental health resources (64 percent); and retaining teachers and preventing them from leaving the profession (63 percent).

The poll also provides a snapshot of how students are currently learning, with 43 percent of parents of school-aged children saying their children are currently attending school in person, compared to 22 percent who are attending school online through a video conferencing tool, and 33 percent who are attending both online and in person. Broken down by region, parents who are Republican (59 percent) or live in rural areas (59 percent) or the south (50 percent) are most likely to have children attending school in person. African American parents (32 percent) and parents in the northeast (31 percent) are most likely to have children attending school online.

Voters continue to value the job public schools are doing in their community with 55 percent rating them positively. When asked their opinion of the online school experience, however, 46 percent of parents say their children do not like attending school online and struggle with not being in a classroom setting while 13 percent say online schooling does not have either a positive or negative impact on their children's experience attending school. Additionally, 16 percent say their children like attending school online and benefit from the virtual platform at home while 25 percent say their children like attending school in person but benefit from the increased online content. This data suggests the public values their local schools and in-person learning, but recognizes going forward that more investment in broadband and technology is also important, particularly to better address learning loss and provide students real-world skills.

The bipartisan poll was conducted from April 14-22 by Lake Research Partners and Chesapeake Beach Consulting. It reached a total of 1,000 likely 2022 voters nationwide with oversamples of African American, Latino, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Native American, and parents of school-age children who are likely 2022 voters.

For the complete poll results, visit

<https://nsbac.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/71/2021/06/NSBAC-Poll-PUBLIC-Version-6-7-21.pdf>.

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The **National School Boards Action Center (NSBAC)** is a champion for public schools and the approximately 51 million students who attend them. It gives people in every community in the country who support their neighborhood school a voice in our nation's capital. Dedicated to its vision to strengthen public schools and provide students with the support they need to get a high-quality education, NSBAC educates, organizes, and mobilizes advocates to secure federal policies that advance public education so students can realize their dreams. NSBAC provides national grassroots advocacy on issues important to school board members and public education. www.nsbac.org

Lake Research Partners (LRP) is a nationally recognized qualitative and quantitative research firm with offices in Washington, DC, New York, and California. LRP has conducted surveys and focus groups for progressive candidates, elected officials, government entities, non-profits, and foundations.

Chesapeake Beach Consulting is a nationally recognized research firm that has conducted surveys and focus groups for Republican candidates at the local, state, and federal level as well as numerous associations and corporations.