

Mood of the Nation Poll: What Americans think schools should do when COVID-19 spikes

Jan. 31, 2022

A plurality of Americans prioritize COVID-19 safety in schools over learning; the remainder is evenly split between favoring in-person instruction with and without masks

"If there is another spike in COVID-19 cases in my community, the schools should..."

Take steps to limit the spread of disease such as remote instruction and masking, even if these steps interfere with students' learning (*)

43%

Continue to offer in-person instruction, but with mandatory masking, even if some students might get sick (**)

28%

Continue to offer in-person instruction without masking, even if some students might get sick (**)

28%

Question: "Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?"

Note: (*)=position favoring masking; (**)=position favoring in-person instruction.

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points.

Summary and key findings

Over the course of the on-going coronavirus pandemic, schools have had to balance their mission of educating students against threats to health and safety. Thus, the December 2021 Mood of the Nation Poll included a series of questions aimed at understanding how the American public thinks local schools should respond to COVID-19 surges in communities.

School health and safety policy is much debated and has often become polarizing.¹ Indeed, results of this analysis show that opinions relating to schools' COVID policies are more divided along lines of political affiliation than based on other salient and potentially relevant lines including parenthood, race and ethnicity, age, income or educational attainment.

Who should influence schools' COVID-19 policies?

- When asked about the level of influence various state and local actors should have on the COVID-19 policies of public schools, Americans most highly support the influence of parents of children who attend those schools, followed by state public health agencies.
 - Forty-six percent think parents should exercise “a great deal of influence” over schools' COVID-19 policies, including over half of all:
 - Republicans,
 - Those age 45 or older,
 - Black Americans, and
 - Parents and others with a child under age 18 in their home.
 - Forty percent think state public health agencies should exercise “a great deal of influence” over the COVID-19 policies of local schools, including over half of all:
 - Democrats
 - Black Americans
 - Just over one-quarter of Americans think that local school boards and teachers should exercise “a great deal of influence” over the COVID-19 policies of local schools.
 - One in three Democrats indicate that school boards and teachers should have a great deal of influence on their schools' COVID-19 policies, compared with only 1 in 5 Republicans.
 - One-fifth of Americans indicate that elected officials, including the state legislature and the governor, as well as local citizens, including those without children attending public schools, should exercise a great deal of influence over the responses that local schools would have to spiking cases of COVID-19.

¹ See for example, <https://www.politico.com/newsletters/weekly-education/2022/01/03/covid-19s-turbulent-new-year-for-american-schools-799620> (accessed Jan. 17, 2022).

Favored school responses to a spike in COVID-19 cases

- In the case of a local spike in COVID-19 cases, a majority thinks school should remain in person.
- An even stronger majority, however, holds positions that favor masking as at least a minimal response to an increase in COVID-19.
- Given three different policy stances to choose from a 43% plurality of the public favors a position where schools would “take steps to limit the spread of disease such as remote instruction and masking, even if these steps interfere with students' learning.”
 - This position is favored by over half of those under 30, Black adults and Democrats.
- Twenty-eight percent of American adults favor a position where schools “continue to offer in-person instruction, but with mandatory masking, even if some students might get sick.”
 - This position is not favored by a majority of any of the demographic groups included in this analysis, but it is consistently favored by between 23% and 33% of each group.
- Twenty-eight percent favor a position where schools confronted with a local spike in COVID-19 “continue to offer in-person instruction without masking, even if some students might get sick.”
 - Fifty percent of Republicans favor this position, far higher than any other demographic group included in this analysis.

Introduction

In the midst of the on-going coronavirus pandemic, the pros and cons of remote instruction and mask mandates in schools have become a political flashpoint.

Thus, the December 2021 Mood of the Nation Poll, conducted as the Omicron variant was just starting to spread in the U.S., included a series of questions aimed at understanding how the American public thinks local schools should respond to COVID-19 surges in communities. Penn State’s nonpartisan McCourtney Institute for Democracy regularly conducts the nationally representative poll to gauge how Americans are feeling about various aspects of American politics and society.²

The first set of questions asked respondents to rate each of six entities on the degree of influence they should have on each of the four topics:

1. At every school in the country, educators have tried to balance the risk of spreading COVID-19 against the costs of having students learn remotely. If we see another spike in COVID-19 cases in your community, how much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to set school health policy for your local public schools?

	A great deal of influence	A fair amount of influence	A little influence	None at all
State government’s public health agencies				
The state legislature and governor				
The local school board				
Teachers				
Local citizens, including those without children attending public schools.				
Parents of children attending public schools				

One-fourth of the respondents were asked an open-ended question about their responses to the questions above:

2. You said that with respect to school safety, [fill in those entities respondent prefers to have a great deal of influence] should have a great deal of influence. Can you tell me why they should have more influence than [entities that the respondent prefers to have less influence]?

² For additional details about this survey’s methodology, please see <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/motn/poll-school-covid-policy>

After answering the questions above respondents were asked about their own policy preferences.

3. Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?

- If there is another spike in COVID-19 cases in my community, the schools should take steps to limit the spread of disease such as remote instruction and masking, even if these steps interfere with student's learning.
- If there is another spike in COVID-19 cases in my community, the schools should continue to offer in-person instruction without masking, even if some students might get sick.
- If there is another spike in COVID-19 cases in my community, the schools should continue to offer in-person instruction, but with mandatory masking, even if some students might get sick.

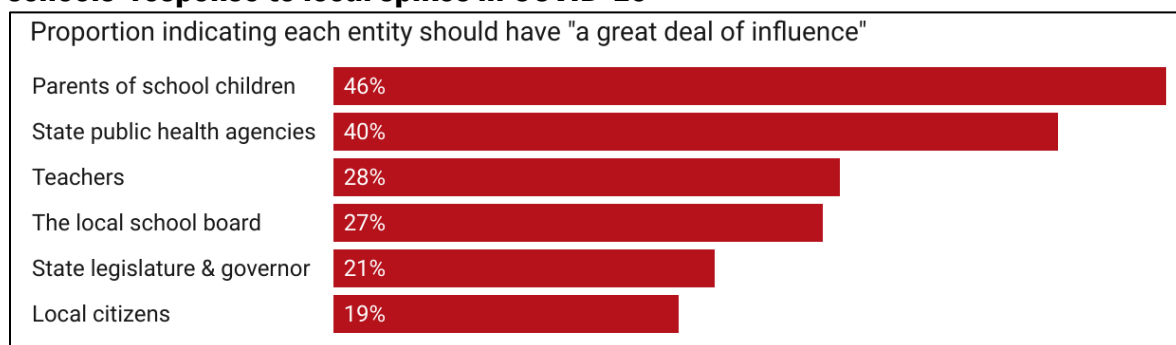
To see whether Americans' opinions on these topics vary according to demographic, social and economic characteristics, we analyzed the results of each question by gender (women, men), age (four groups), race and ethnicity (four groups are available in this survey: White, non-Hispanic; Black, non-Hispanic; Hispanic or Latino; Other), educational attainment and political affiliation (Republican, Independent, Democrat). The number of respondents in each group are detailed in the methodology report that accompanies this brief.

Opinions on who should shape school health policy during a local spike in COVID-19

Survey participants were presented with the all-too-real question: “At every school in the country, educators have tried to balance the risk of spreading COVID-19 against the costs of having students learn remotely. If we see another spike in COVID-19 cases in your community, how much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to set school health policy for your local public schools?”

The responses indicate that Americans most highly support the influence of parents of children in public schools, followed by state public health agencies. The next tier of support went to teachers and local school boards, followed by state legislators and their fellow local citizens (including citizens without children attending public schools).

Americans are most supportive of parents and state public health agencies influencing schools’ response to local spikes in COVID-19



Question: "At every school in the country, educators have tried to balance the risk of spreading Covid-19 against the costs of having students learn remotely. If we see another spike in COVID-19 cases in your community, how much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to set school health policy for your local public schools?"

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute’s Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

Nearly half indicate that **parents of school children** should have “a great deal of influence” over the COVID-19 policies of local schools, including over half of all:

- Republicans, including political independents who say they lean Republican (63%), as well as political independents who do not lean toward either major party (53%).
 - Only one-third of Democrats, including political independents who lean Democrat, think parents should have a great deal of influence on COVID-19 policies in the schools.
- Those age 65 or older (57%), as well as those age 45 to 64 (53%).

- Those with some college or an associate’s degree (54%).
- Black Americans (53%).
- Parents and others with a child under age 18 in the home (51%).

Forty percent of Americans think that **state public health agencies** should exercise “a great deal of influence” over the COVID-19 policies of local schools, including over half of all:

- Democrats, including political independents who lean Democrat (59%).
 - Only 1 in 5 Republicans indicate that state public health agencies should have a great deal of influence on COVID-19 policies in the schools.
- Black Americans (52%).

Just over one-quarter of Americans think that **local school boards** and **teachers** should exercise “a great deal of influence” over the COVID-19 policies of local schools. When taking into account the margin of error associated with the survey results, there are no dramatic differences between demographic groups in terms of their levels of support for either local school boards or teachers, but some interesting differences include:

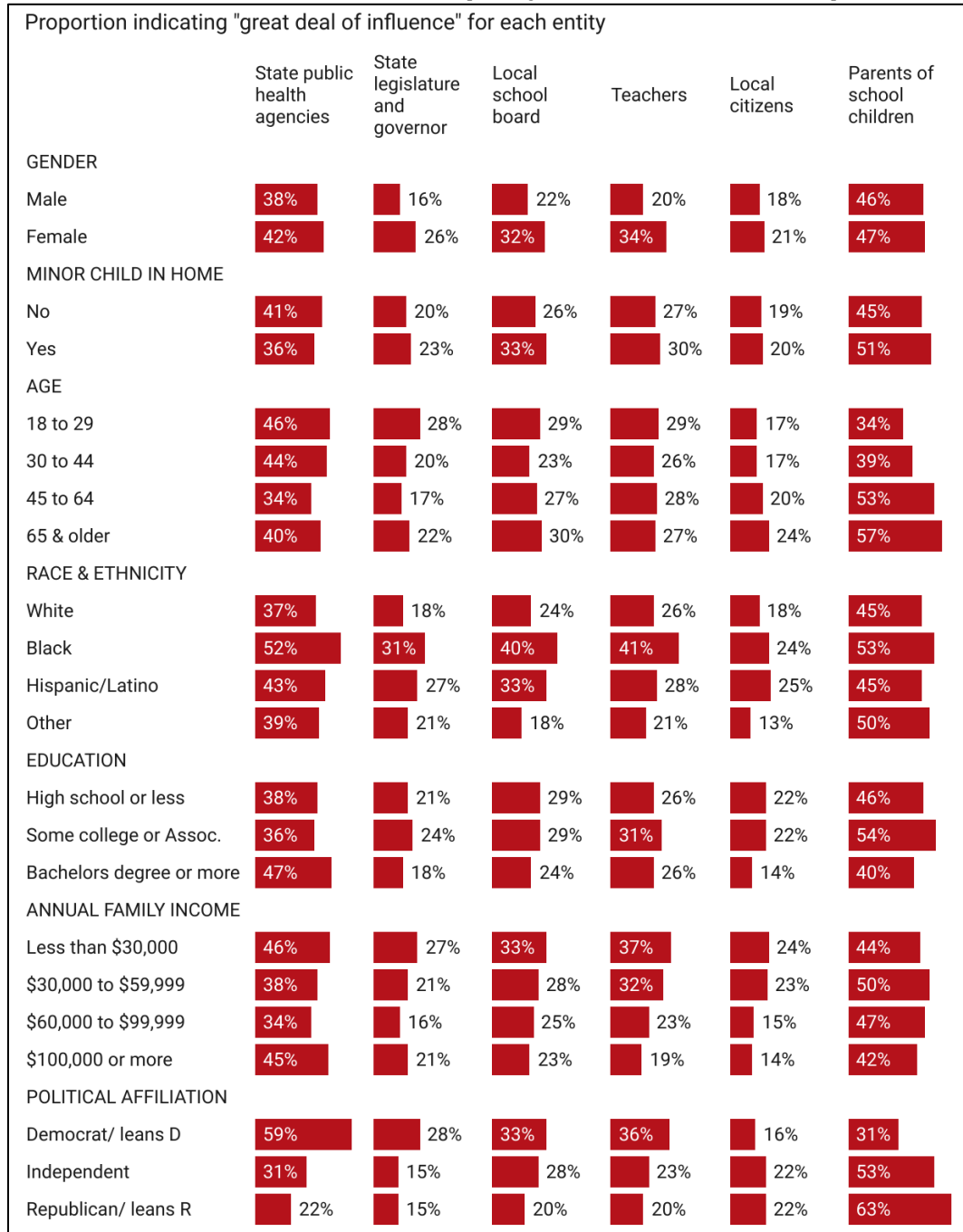
- Two in five Black Americans voice a great deal of support for the influence of both local school boards and teachers in local school-related COVID-19 policies, compared to less than 1 in 3 White and Latino Americans.
- Thirty-seven percent of those with annual family incomes below \$30,000 support teachers having a great deal of influence on school COVID-19 policies, whereas only 19% of those with annual family incomes above \$100,000 express that level of support. A similar, but somewhat muted difference exists along lines of income concerning support for local school boards’ influence.
- One in three Democrats indicate that school boards and teachers should have a great deal of influence on their schools’ COVID-19 policies, compared with only 1 in 5 Republicans.
- One in three women indicate that school boards and teachers should have a great deal of influence on their schools’ COVID-19 policies, compared with only 1 in 5 men.

One-fifth of Americans indicate that elected officials, including **the state legislature and the governor**, as well as **local citizens**, including those without children attending public schools, should exercise a great deal of influence over the responses that local schools would have to spiking cases of COVID-19.

- The proportion of Democrats who say that state legislatures and the governor should have “a great deal of influence” over school-based COVID-19 policies, 28%, is nearly twice that of Independents and Republicans (15% each).
- The proportion of Republicans and Independents who say that local citizens, including those without children, should have a “great deal of influence” over school health

policies related to COVID-19, 22%, is somewhat higher than is the case among Democrats (16%).

Who should influence school health policy in the case of a local spike in COVID-19?



Question: "If we see another spike in COVID-19 cases in your community, how much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to set school health policy for your local public schools?"

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In their own words: Opinions on who should influence COVID-19 policies in the schools

The poll included an open-ended question asking respondents to provide their reasons for designating that some entities should have “a great deal of influence” while indicating that other entities should not have that high level of influence. Here are some examples of the verbatim responses:

“I believe government closest to the people is, more often than not, is best to make community decisions.” – 75-year-old White male Republican from Massachusetts who indicated that the local school board, teachers, local citizens, and parents of children attending public schools should have a great deal of influence over the COVID-19 policies of local schools.

“Because it's the school board, the board should be able to influence what goes on in the schools.” – 25-year-old Black female Democrat from New York who indicated that state public health agencies as well as the local school board should have a great deal of influence over the COVID-19 policies of local schools.

“They understand their schools better than anyone, let them make the policies.” – 43-year-old Latino male Democrat from New Jersey who indicated that the local school board and local citizens, including those without children attending public schools, should have a great deal of influence over the COVID-19 policies of local schools.

“Politics and personal bias are rampant in most groups. Using professions who study and think about such issues is much more likely to produce rational policy.” – 65-year-old White male Democrat from Colorado who indicated that state public health agencies should have a great deal of influence over the COVID-19 policies of local schools.

“Parents, grandparents, and people with grown children have a personal interest in the safety of their loved ones. They are more likely to take the time to study published data from a broad pool. Public health agencies are taking their orders from the highest levels of government which goes all the way up to unreliable people such as those heading the CDC.” – 72-year-old White female Independent from Kansas who indicated that the local school board and local citizens, including those without children attending public schools, should have a great deal of influence over the COVID-19 policies of local schools.

“It's their children, the government needs to stay out of people's lives. Let parents be parents.” – 54-year-old White female Republican from the state of Washington who indicated that parents of children attending public schools should have a great deal of influence over the COVID-19 policies of local schools

School policy preferences in responses to local spike in COVID-19 cases

In addition to the question of who the public thinks should influence school COVID-19 policies is the basic question of the public's underlying priorities in responding to a not-so-theoretical scenario of a rapid increase in COVID-19 cases.

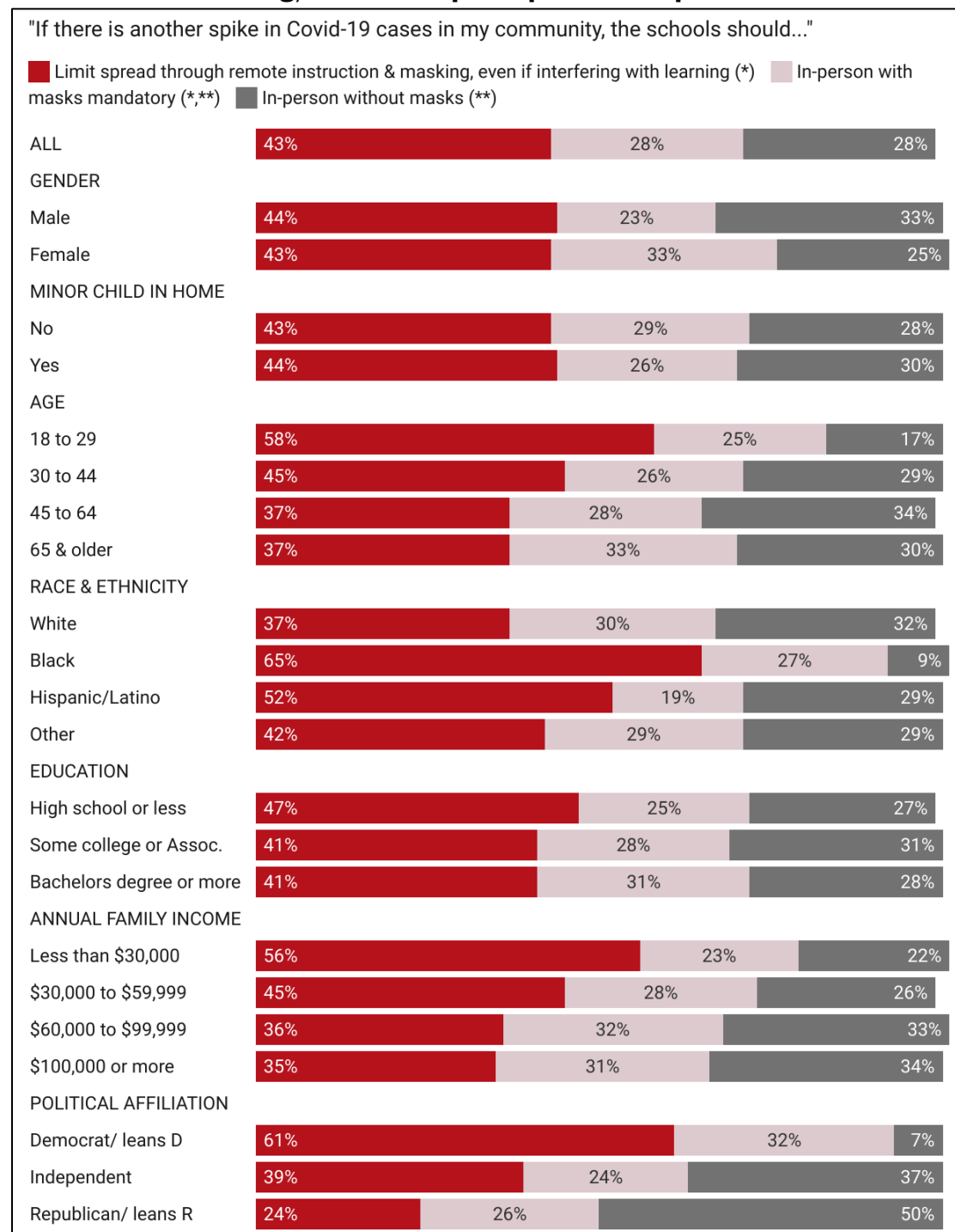
Results from a question asking respondents which of three statements comes closest to their views, suggest that **most Americans—about 3 in 5—prioritize maintaining in-person instruction** “even if some students might get sick.” That majority, however, is evenly split between those who favor an in-person setting with “mandatory masking” and those who prefer schooling “without masking.”

About 2 in 5 favor a response that would prioritize limiting the spread of COVID-19, even at the expense of student learning. Note, that this position mentions masking as a potential response to a COVID-19 outbreak. Thus, combining those favoring this response with those favoring in-person instruction with mandatory masking it seems safe to say that **a strong majority of Americans, over 70%, favor masking** at least as a school's minimal response to a local spike in COVID-19 cases.

As noted in the following graph, most demographic groups are similar to the public at large: a small majority indicate they would favor one of the two statements representing a continuation of in-person instruction if there were a local spike in COVID-19 cases. And, in most groups, a strong majority favors one of the two statements indicating that masking should at least be a school's minimal response to an increase in COVID-19. Exceptions to these patterns include:

- Those under 30, Black adults and Democrats; over half of those in these groups prioritize limiting COVID in schools, “even if interfering with learning.”
- Republicans, including independents who lean Republican, which is the only group with 50% indicating that they would favor continuation of in-person instruction, without masking.

Clear majorities of those under 30, Black adults and Democrats prioritize limiting COVID in schools over learning; others are split or prioritize in-person instruction



Question: "Which of the following statements comes closest to your views?"

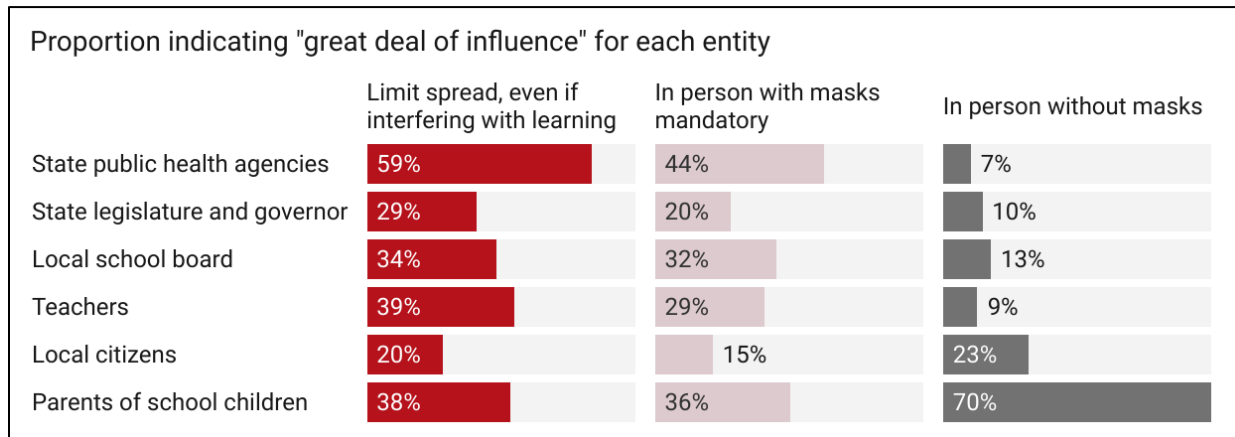
Note: (*)=position favoring masking; (**)=position favoring in-person instruction.

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Finally, when analyzing the results to the question of (a) who should be influencing schools' COVID policies according to (b) general preferences in the response that schools should take in case of a spike in COVID-19, it becomes obvious that there is a strong relationship between the two sets of opinions. For example:

- A majority (59%) of those who prioritize limiting the spread of COVID-19 even if that interferes with learning believe that state public health agencies should have a great deal of influence on schools' COVID-19 policies.
- A strong majority (70%) of those who prioritize “in person instruction without masking” believe that parents should have a great deal of influence over the COVID-19 policies of their local schools.
 - Very few, 10% or less, of those who favor “in person instruction without masking” believe that state public health agencies, their state legislature and governor, or teachers should have strong influence on COVID-19 policies in the schools.

Opinions on who should influence school COVID policies are closely related to the preferred policy outcome



Questions: "Which of the following statements comes closest to your views? If there is another spike in COVID-19 cases in my community, the schools should..." (columns). "If we see another spike in COVID-19 cases in your community, how much influence should each of the following groups have in deciding how to set school health policy for your local public schools?" (rows).

Source: APM Research Lab analysis of McCourtney Institute's Mood of the Nation Poll, Nov. 30-Dec. 7, 2021. N = 1,200 U.S. adults age 18 or older; the overall margin of error is ± 3.7 percentage points, and is larger for subgroups.

About the APM Research Lab

The APM Research Lab is a department within American Public Media that informs the public about challenges and opportunities facing families, communities and organizations throughout the nation. Our mission is to foster an engaged democracy by inspiring curiosity, inquiry and discussion through fact-driven, credible research and analysis. Our Values: Independent, Useful, Informative, Non-partisan.

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About the McCourtney Institute for Democracy

The McCourtney Institute for Democracy at Penn State promotes scholarship and practical innovations that defend and advance democracy in the United States and abroad. Through teaching, research and public outreach, the Institute leverages the resources of Penn State and partners around the world to foster a model of deliberation, policymaking and responsiveness that is passionate, informed and civil.

The Mood of the Nation Poll offers a unique approach to public opinion polling. It allows Americans to speak in their own words through open-ended questions that focus on emotions like anger and hope, as well as commitment to constitutional principles.

Contact: democracyinst@psu.edu | democracy.psu.edu

About the survey

Data collection for this Mood of the Nation Poll was conducted online by YouGov (<https://today.yougov.com/>). The YouGov panel includes over 1.8 million individuals who agree to complete occasional surveys. The 1,200 individuals who completed the April Mood of the Nation Poll were matched to the joint distribution from the Census's American Community Survey in terms of age, sex, race and ethnicity, and years of education. The frame was augmented by matching to the November 2010 Current Population Survey and the Pew Religious Life Survey in order to include voter registration, political interest and party identification in the selection model.

For additional details about the sample and survey methodology, as well as transparency disclosures relevant to the American Association of Public Opinion, the Roper Center and CNN, please see: <https://www.apmresearchlab.org/surveys>.

Acknowledgments

This report was authored by Craig Helmstetter of the APM Research Lab and Eric Plutzer of the McCourtney Institute for Democracy, with input from Benjamin Clary and Terrence Fraser of the APM Research Lab. The survey questions were designed by the McCourtney Institute.

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