

Back to School: Bright Spots and Pain Points

Findings from a survey of K-12 parents in Massachusetts

November 17, 2021

Maeve Duggan, Research Director, The MassINC Polling Group

This project was sponsored by the Barr Foundation

info@massincpolling.com MassINCPolling.com [@MassINCPolling](https://twitter.com/MassINCPolling)

11 Beacon St Ste 500 | Boston, MA 02108 | Phone: (617) 224-1647



Survey Background

- Results based on a statewide survey of 1,479 parents of school-age children in Massachusetts, including oversamples of Black, Latino, and Asian parents.
- Fifth in a series of polls with prior waves in May/June 2020, October 2020, February/March 2021, and April/May 2021.
- Conducted October 18 – November 2nd, 2021 via live telephone and online interviewing in English and Spanish.
- Data was weighted to known population parameters by age, gender, race, education, and region.
- Sponsored by the Barr Foundation with major project input and assistance from the Education Trust.

Key Findings

- After the disruptions to school brought by COVID, parents are optimistic about their students' learning and have high expectations.
- More parents think their child will be ahead of grade level by the end of the school year than were ahead before the pandemic.
- But there is a disconnect between parents' expectations and the realities they report in terms of information and resources.

Key Findings (continued)

- Few parents have received diagnostic assessments, mostly relying on classroom grades and teacher comments to judge their child's progress.
- Many parents say a range of academic resources are either unavailable at their child's school or they are unsure.
 - Parents who say their child is behind grade level are the least likely to say these supports are being used or available to them.
- Parents are largely unaware of their school district's plans on how to spend expected recovery funding.
- Parents would focus recovery funding on tutoring and extra academic support, mental health awareness, and expanded technical and vocational programs.

Key Findings (continued)

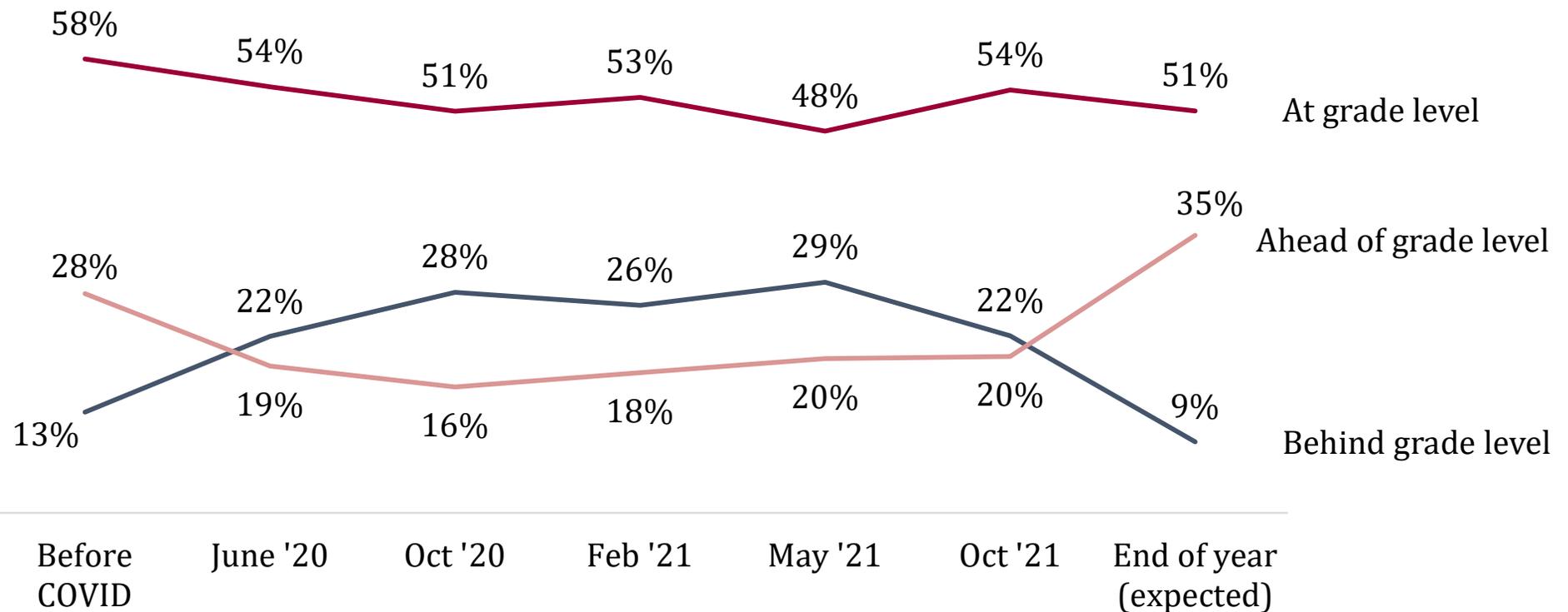
- Mental and emotional health continues to be a concern for parents, although a plurality place it on equal footing with academics.
- Most parents have vaccinated their eligible children and/or plan to vaccinate their children once they become eligible (the eligibility guidelines changed at the end of fielding).
- Still, about a third of parents with ineligible children say they will not get their child vaccinated when the time comes, or have not decided yet.
- Parents are satisfied with the expectations and protocols surrounding COVID safety at their schools.

Parents are optimistic about this school year

- Parents think students will make immense academic progress this year. Even more expect their child to be ahead of grade level at the end of this year than were before COVID.

Parents expect children to recover to pre-pandemic academic levels

% of parents who say their child is / will be _____



Note: "Before COVID" figures are from the June wave of this series.

Q: Prior to the coronavirus crisis, do you think your child's academics were at / behind / ahead of grade level? How about now?

Q: By the end of this academic year, do you expect your child to be at / behind / ahead of grade level?

Catching up or staying behind?

- A majority of parents who say their child is currently behind grade level expect them to catch up by the end of the year.
- Roughly a third of these parents expect they will stay behind.

Most parents say the return to school has had a positive impact on their child

% of parents who say their child will be _____ by the end of the year, by current grade level achievement

		Child is currently...		
		At grade level	Behind grade level	Ahead of grade level
Expect child to be _____ by end of year	At grade level	68%	49%	12%
	Behind grade level	3%	30%	2%
	Ahead of grade level	28%	13%	84%

Note: "Before COVID" figures are from the June wave of this series.

Q: Prior to the coronavirus crisis, do you think your child's academics were at / behind / ahead of grade level? How about now?

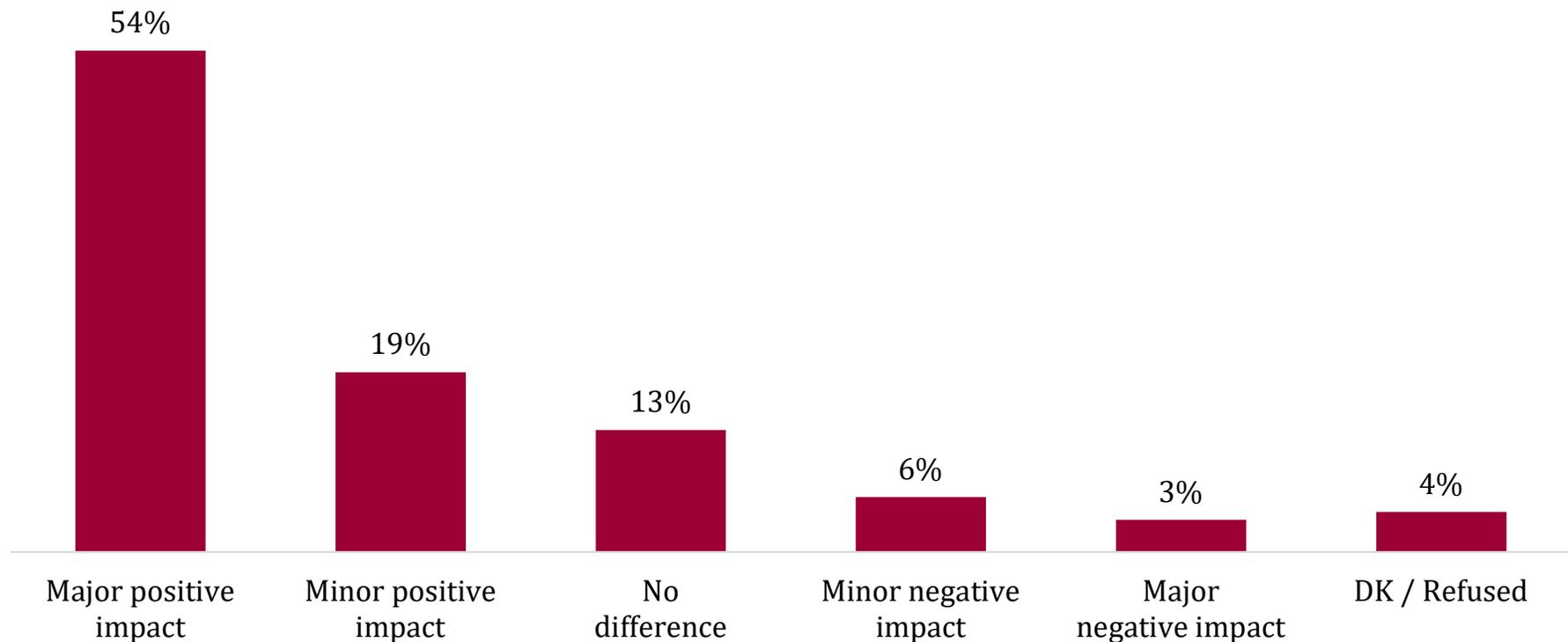
Q: By the end of this academic year, do you expect your child to be at / behind / ahead of grade level?

Very positive views of return to school

- A majority of parents across demographic groups say the return to school has had a positive impact on their child.

Most parents say the return to school has had a positive impact on their child

% of parents who say the return to school has had a ___ on their child



Positive impacts – open ends

- Nearly three-quarters of parents say the return to school has had a positive impact on their child.
- In open end responses, they primarily credit socialization, along with a supportive learning environment.

Half of parents credit socialization for school's positive impact

% of parents who say the return to school has had a positive impact on their child due to...

Socialization / interaction with teachers, friends, etc.	52%
Supportive learning environment (more focus, hands-on help from teachers, better grades, more feedback)	18%
Health / happiness (improved mental/emotional health, better behavior, happier not being isolated)	10%
Improvement from remote learning (previously too much screen time, stuck at home, didn't learn, etc.)	8%
General "better" comments (Enjoys school, better in person, likes it more)	6%
Normalcy / routine	6%
Other	7%
No opinion / N/A / Don't know	3%

Negative impacts – open ends

- Only 9% of parents say the return to school has had a negative impact on their child.
- Top reasons in open ends for negative impact are COVID concerns or kids finding the adjustment overwhelming / stressful.

COVID, mental health concerns cited for negative experience returning to school

% of parents who say the return to school has had a negative impact on their child due to...

Mental/emotional/behavioral health (overwhelming, stressful, difficult transition, etc.)	27%
COVID concerns (unable to be vaccinated, scared to get it, nervous all day, etc.)	24%
Academic concerns (behind in class, large class sizes, etc.)	18%
Inconsistency (COVID cases / testing days off, preferring home, etc.)	14%
Mandates (wearing masks, protocols, etc.)	7%
Other	10%
Don't know / N/A	7%

No difference – open ends

- 13% of parents say the return to school has made no difference to their child.
- Parents attribute this to consistent school situations or qualities of their child, while others came up with some positives/negatives on second thought.

Parents say school/child consistency means little difference for this year

% of parents who say the return to school has made no difference to their child due to...

Nothing changed (always good academics, same friends, same spirit, etc.)	24%
Consistency (in-person last year, school is same, etc.)	22%
Qualities of child (adapts well, motivated, etc.)	11%
Negatives (academic/emotional concerns, COVID, etc.)	11%
Positives (good to be in school, making friends, etc.)	9%
Things are the same / no difference	7%
New to school (first year or too little to remember)	4%
Other	6%
Don't know / N/A	9%

Quotes on impacts

Positive: “The return to school this year has had a positive impact on my child because he is able to interact with his peers as well as his teachers in person rather than being isolated at home over a computer.”

Positive: “Because he gets one on one with the teacher and gets more support from his teacher than home.”

Negative: “My child is very afraid of corona virus to the point where it is messing up her daily activities especially when it comes to learning.”

Negative: “He’s having a hard time emotionally after so many gaps in services.”

No difference: “Because her school has been operating and opened throughout the pandemic.”

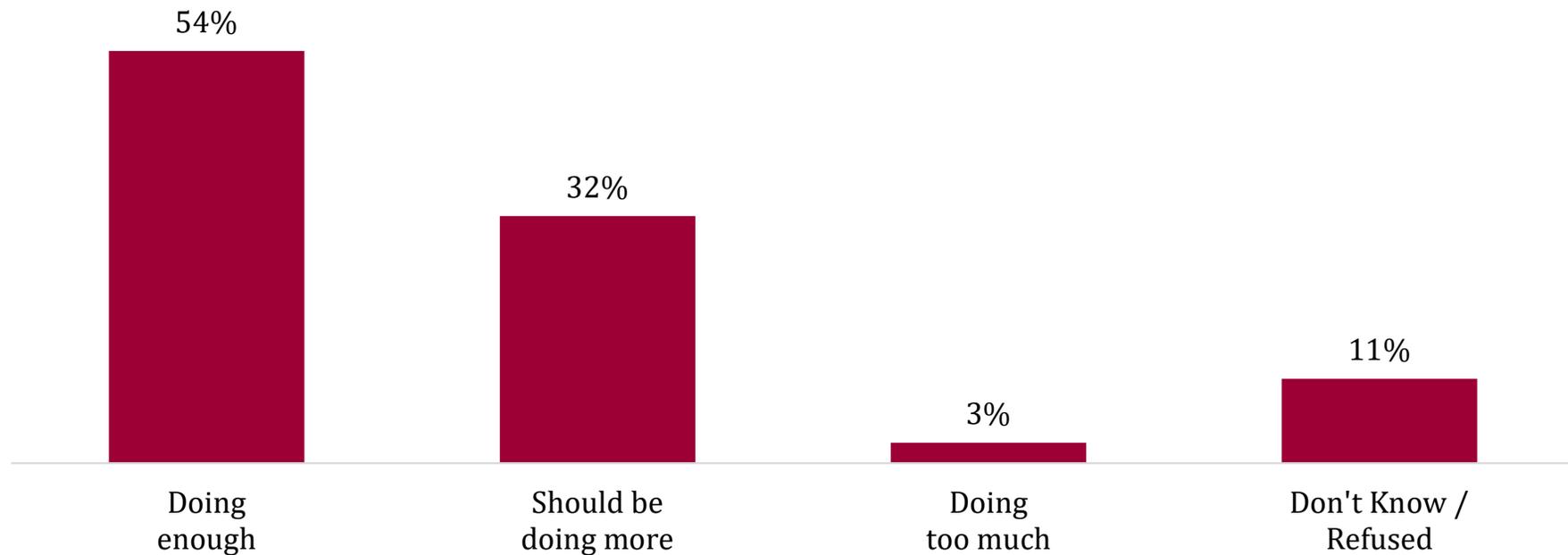
No difference: “My child is very self-educated and very good at learning.”

Are schools doing enough?

- About half of parents believe school are doing enough to help students catch up, while nearly a third think schools should be doing more.

Over half of parents think schools are doing enough to help students catch up

% of parents who say their child's school is _____ to help children catch up academically



Academic info parents receive

- Classroom grades and communications with teachers are the primary sources of information parents receive about their child's academics. Only about a third have received diagnostic assessments.

MCAS, diagnostics less common information for parents to receive

% of parents who say they have received each kind of information about their child's academics

	Overall	K - 4th	5th - 8th	9th - 12th
Classroom grades	58%	46%	66%	67%
Conversation or note from a teacher	48%	58%	48%	38%
Results of diagnostic assessments, or tests that measure your child's learning progress	35%	35%	39%	33%
MCAS results	26%	13%	36%	32%
Conversation or note from a guidance counselor	17%	11%	20%	23%
Other	7%	9%	5%	7%
Don't Know / Refused	6%	6%	4%	6%

Judging academic progress

- Parents mostly rely on grades and information from the teacher. Parents of middle school students (who take MCAS more often) are more likely to include the results in their judgments.

Parents rely most on grades and information from teachers to judge academics

% of parents who say they rely on each kind of information to judge their child's academic progress

	Overall	K - 4th	5th - 8th	9th - 12th
Classroom grades	56%	42%	60%	71%
Conversation or note from a teacher	43%	52%	44%	33%
Results of diagnostic assessments, or tests that measure your child's learning progress	34%	41%	35%	25%
MCAS results	20%	12%	30%	19%
Conversation or note from a guidance counselor	13%	10%	14%	18%
Other	9%	12%	5%	9%
Don't Know / Refused	5%	4%	3%	4%

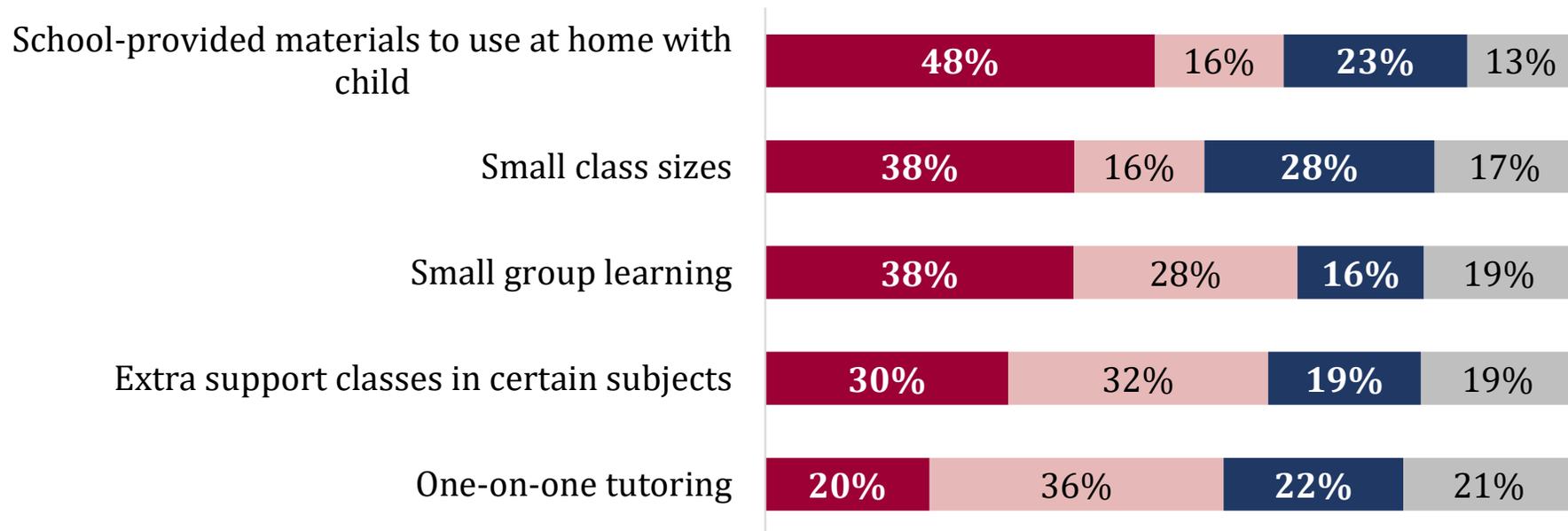
Extra academic supports uneven

- Many parents are unsure which services are available at their child's school, and notable proportions say the services are unavailable entirely.

Over a third of parents say academic supports are unavailable or are unsure

% of parents who say their child _____ each of the following academic support services

■ Uses service ■ Does not use, but service available ■ Service unavailable ■ Unsure



Academic supports by school type

- Public school parents are less likely to say resources like one-on-one tutoring and small class sizes are used or available to them.

Types of available resources depend heavily on school format

% of parents who say their child uses each resource or it is available to them at school

	Overall	Public	Charter	Catholic	Private
Small group learning	66%	65%	73%	72%	69%
School-provided materials I can use at home with my child	64%	63%	74%	56%	77%
Support classes, like an extra class of math or reading	62%	61%	73%	61%	65%
One-on-one tutoring	57%	55%	70%	57%	71%
Small class sizes	54%	50%	71%	83%	85%

Farther behind, fewer resources

- Parents who say their children are currently behind grade level are also less likely to report using/having available various resources.

Students most in need least likely to have resources available to them

% of parents who say their child uses each resource or it is available to them at school

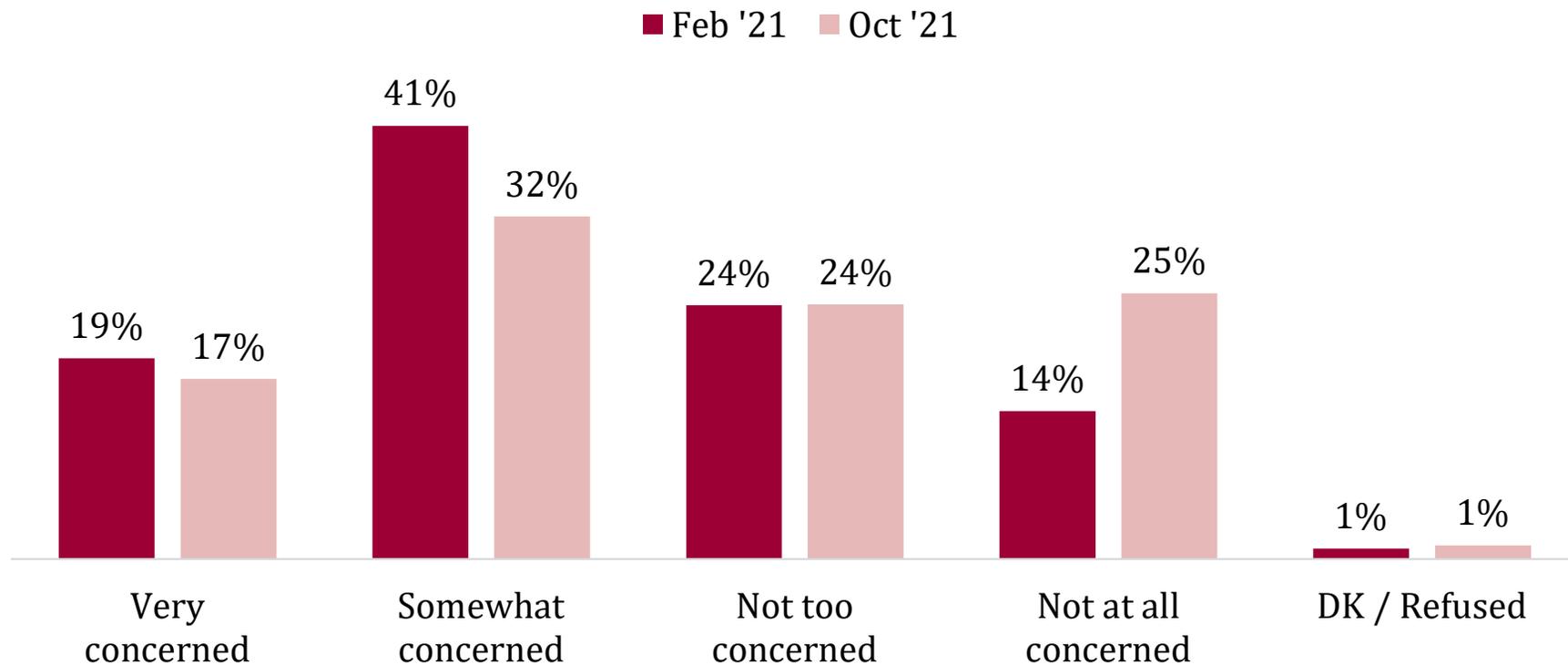
	Overall	At grade level	Behind grade level	Ahead of grade level
Small group learning	66%	69%	61%	68%
School-provided materials I can use at home with my child	64%	70%	48%	71%
Support classes, like an extra class of math or reading	62%	68%	47%	69%
One-on-one tutoring	57%	61%	45%	64%
Small class sizes	54%	58%	44%	60%

Concern over mental/emotional health

- Mental health concerns remain elevated, but have tapered off slightly since February of 2021.

Most parents express concern over their children's mental/emotional health

% of parents who say they are _____ about their child's mental/emotional health



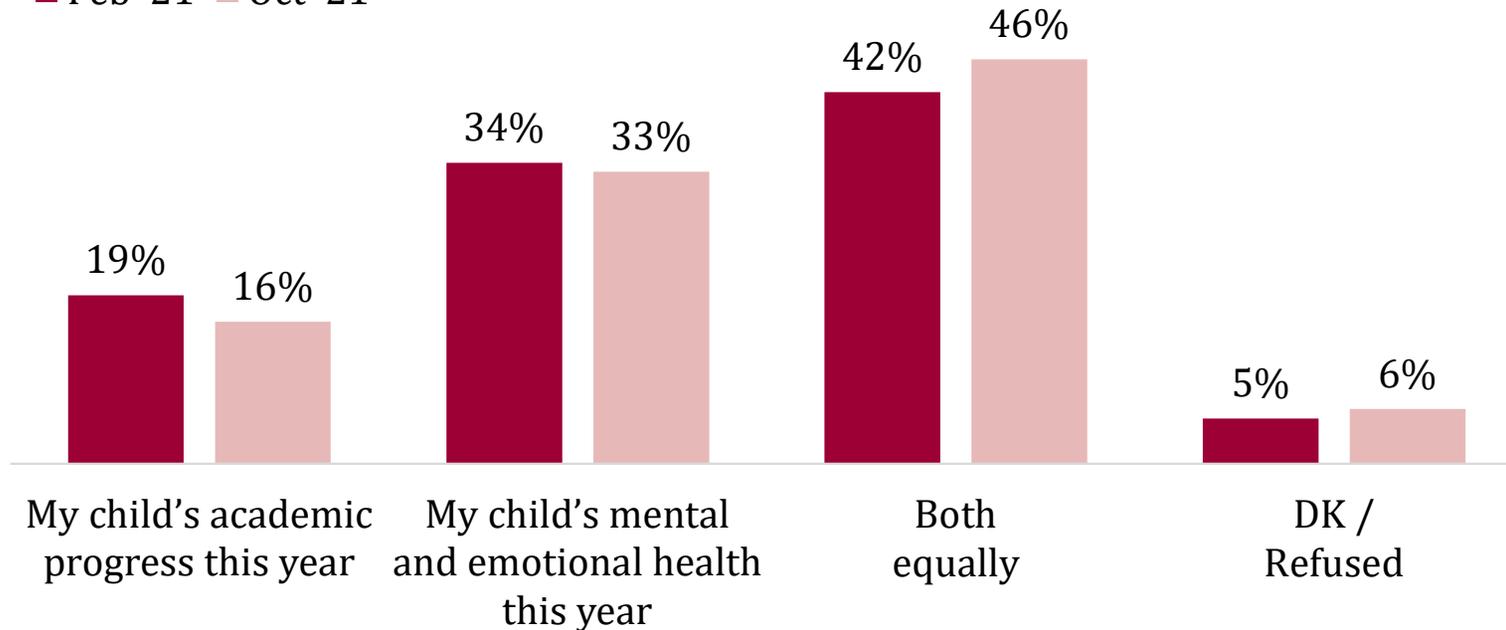
Academics vs. mental health

- The plurality of parents are equally concerned about their child's mental health and academics. For a third of parents, mental health remains the priority as it was in Feb. '21.

Parents give similar weight to mental health concerns as they did last year

% of parents who say _____ is more concerning to them

■ Feb '21 ■ Oct '21



Little info/attention to ARPA funding

- Parents have received little information on expected recovery funding from the American Rescue Plan.

Parents have little information about ARPA funding plans or uses

Regarding recovery funding, % of parents who have ____

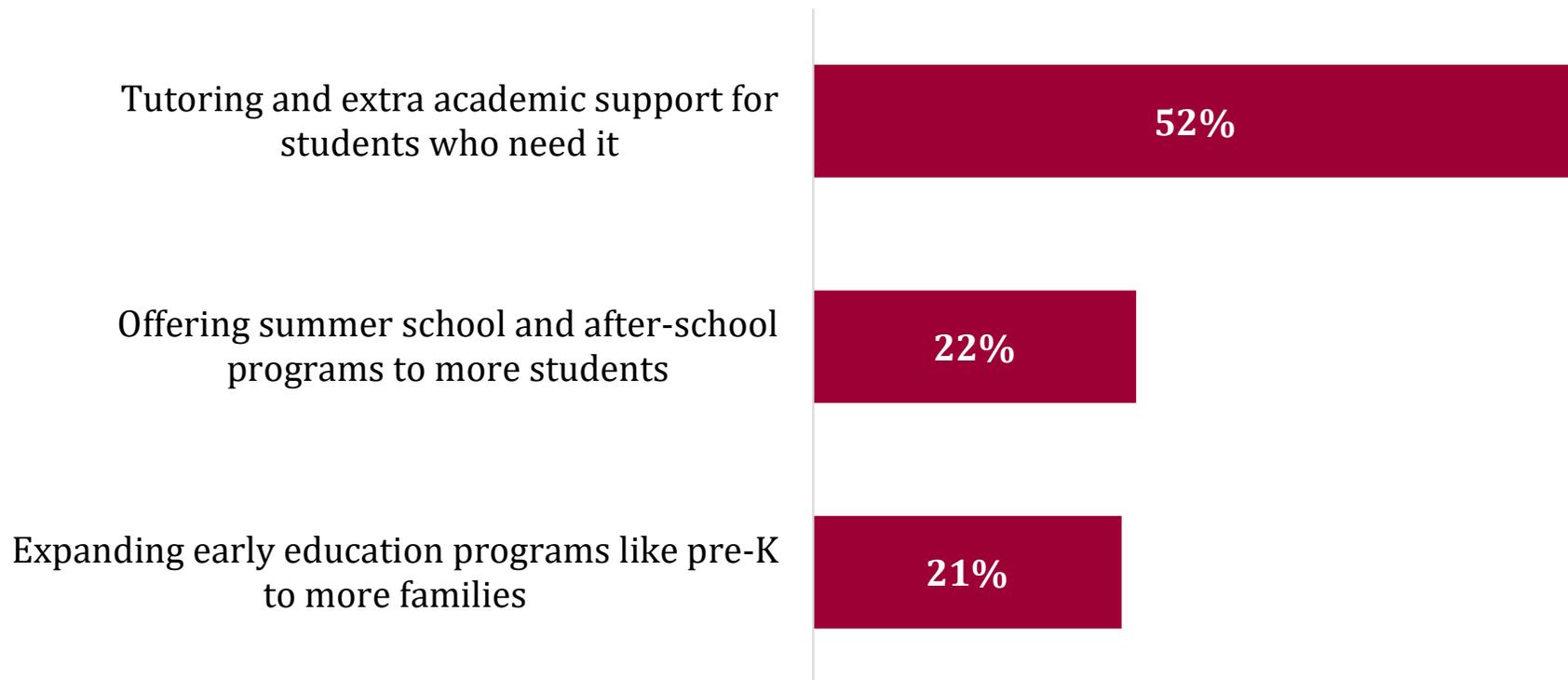
	Yes	No	Unsure
Heard how the school district plans to spend the money	20%	59%	21%
Heard if the school district has already received at least part of the money	19%	49%	32%
Been asked for input on how to spend the money	20%	66%	15%
Noticed an impact the additional funding has had on your child[ren]'s school experience	20%	57%	23%

What parents want - academics

- Tutoring and extra academic support is far and away parents' top academic priority for recovery funding.

Parents most value tutoring and extra support rather than pre-K or summer school

% of parents who ranked each of the following #1 for how to spend recovery funding on academics



What parents want – mental health

- Incorporating mental health awareness into the curriculum is the most popular funding priority.

Mental health awareness tops parent priority list for mental/emotional health spending

% of parents who ranked each of the following #1 for how to spend recovery funding on mental/emotional health

Incorporating mental health awareness into the curriculum

36%

Hiring more mental health counselors

29%

Making mental health screenings available for students

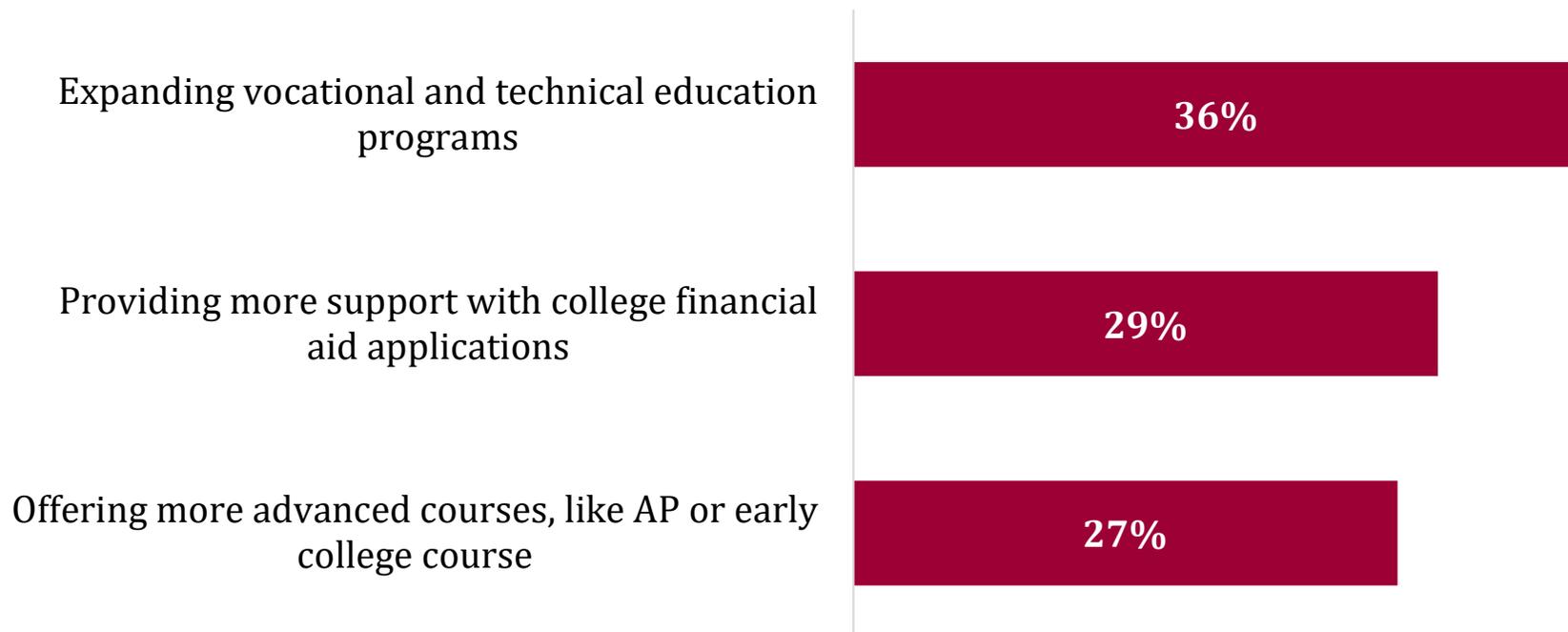
26%

What parents want – college prep

- Over a third of parents rank vocational and technical education programs as their #1 funding priority for college or post-graduate plans.

Vocational/technical programs biggest priority for parents on post-grad plans

% of parents who ranked each of the following #1 for how to spend recovery funding on college readiness / post-graduation plans

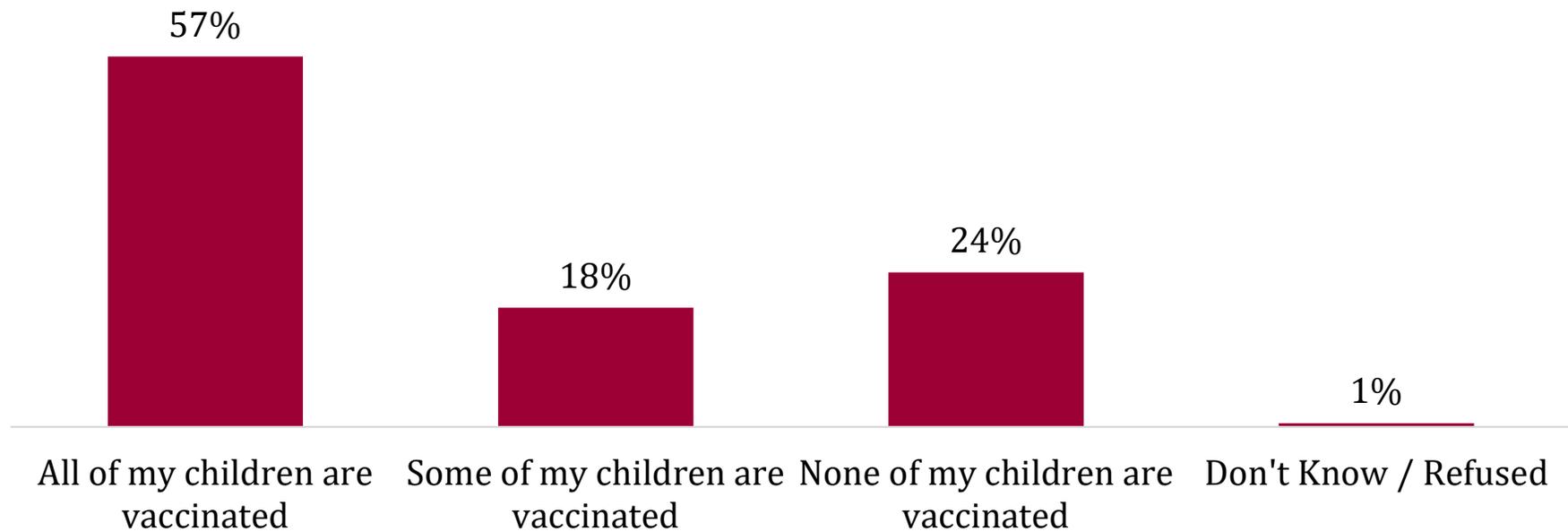


Vaccination status

- Among parents with eligible children, roughly three-quarters have had at least one child vaccinated, including over half who say all of their children are vaccinated.

Over half of parents with eligible children say they are all fully vaccinated

% of parents with eligible children who say...

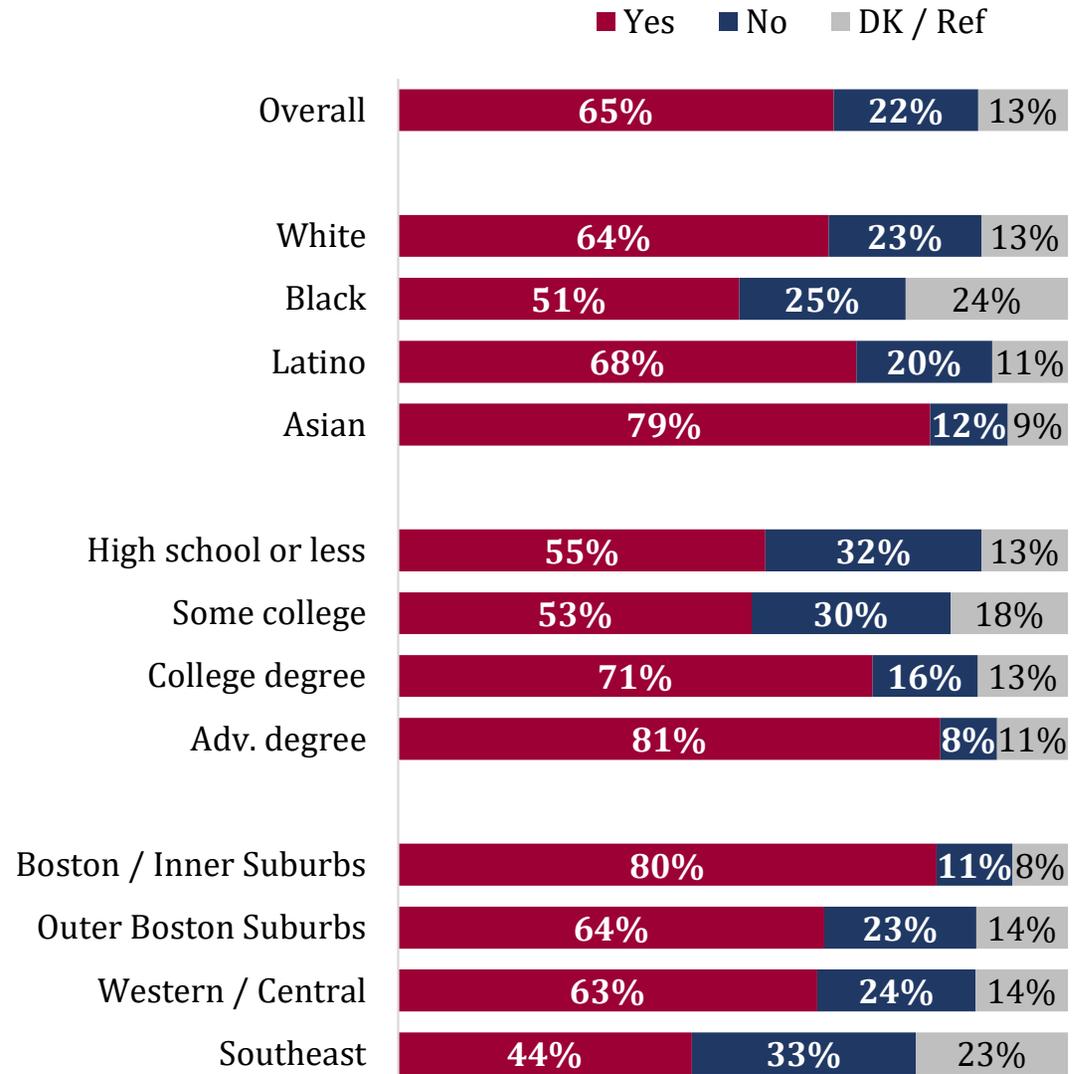


Plans to vaccinate

- Overall, about one-in-three parents do not plan to get their children vaccinated when possible, or remain unsure.
- This raises the possibility of a burst of vaccinations, followed by a major slowdown.
- Education level and region relate most closely to vaccination plans for children.

Most parents of ineligible children plan to vaccinate

% of parents of ineligible children who plan to get vaccine



Q: Thinking about your children who are not yet eligible for the COVID vaccine, do you plan to have them vaccinated when they become eligible?

Why not vaccinate?

- Among those who do not plan to vaccinate their children, common reasons cited in open end responses are wanting more research or info, safety concerns, or protection of choice.

“No vax” parents want more research / info

% of parents who do not plan to vaccinate their children due to...

Want more research / information	33%
Safety concerns (side effects, long-term effects)	20%
Choice (freedom of choice, their choice)	16%
Age (too young, not eligible, not at risk)	10%
Trust / risk (don't trust it, more risk getting vaccine)	13%
Personal (medical, religious, personal reasons)	7%
Immunity / already had COVID	6%
Other	7%
Never / not interested / No	4%

“No vax” parent quotes

“Because they are healthy and even if they get vaccinated they can spread and receive COVID.”

“No, we won't have it because we already had covid19 and we have immune system and I don't want to be part of this experiment.”

“Waiting for a few years to see its effectiveness.”

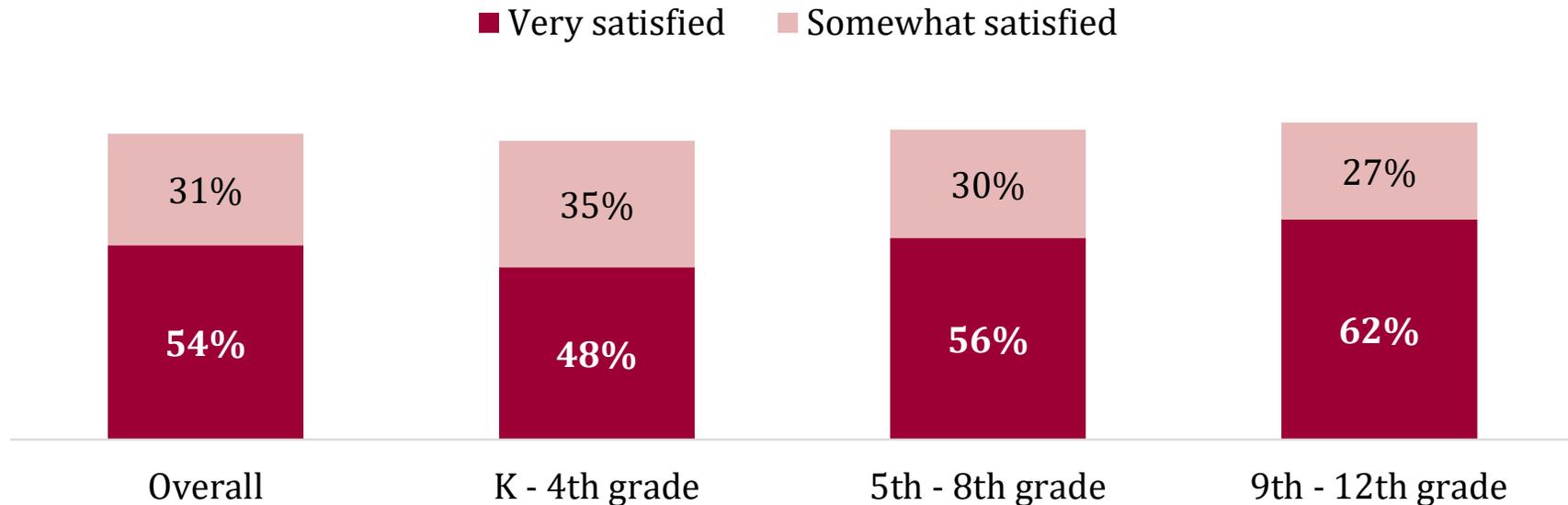
“First we have a level of immunity as we had it the month before it had a name , secondly these shots were too rushed. In 10 years things [will be] popping up no doubt medically. And thirdly children today get the...minimum of 42 shots /vaxes by 14 [years old].”

Satisfaction with COVID policies

- The large majority of parents are satisfied with the approach their child’s school is taking with COVID safety.
- Parents of older children are somewhat more likely to be “very satisfied,” perhaps reflecting the added comfort of student vaccinations.

Parents of older children “very satisfied” with COVID safety protocols

% of parents who are very / somewhat satisfied with COVID safety protocols at their child’s school

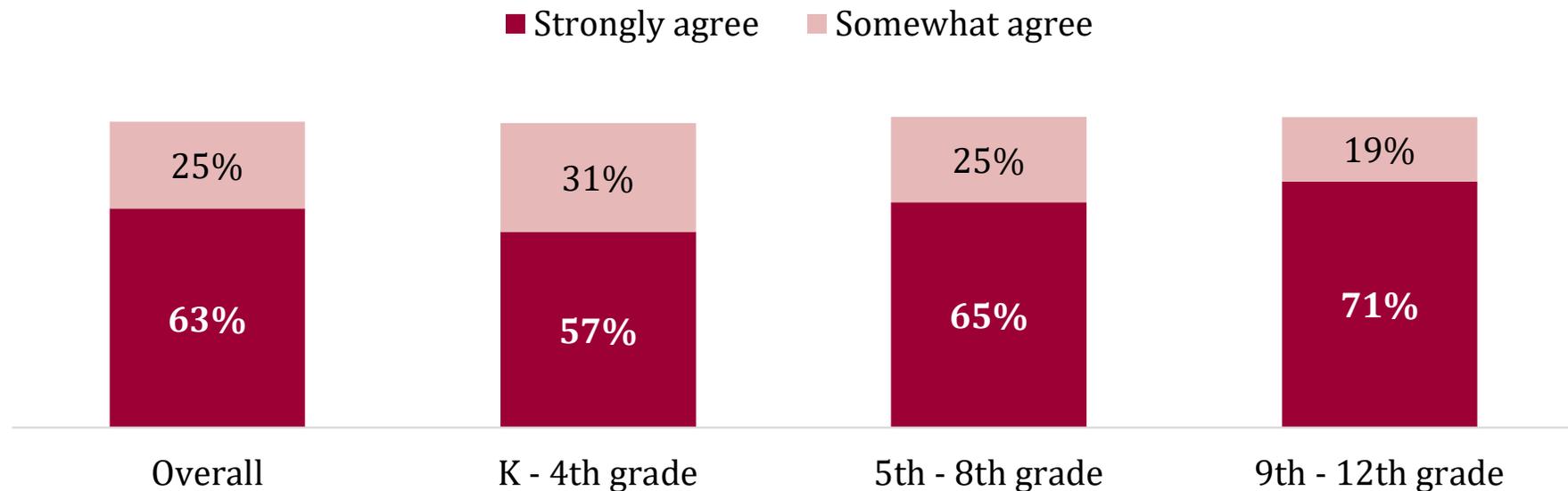


COVID communication

- Parents strongly agree that their child's school has communicated clearly about COVID safety expectations and policies, especially true of parents of older students.

Parents report clear communication on COVID safety policies

% of parents who ____ that their child's school has clearly communication COVID policies / expectations



Thank you!

- Results and a recording of today's presentation are available at massincpolling.com/education
- Please email any questions or comments to mduggan@massincpolling.com



info@massincpolling.com MassINCPolling.com [@MassINCPolling](https://twitter.com/MassINCPolling)

11 Beacon St, Suite 500 | Boston, MA 02108 | Phone: (617) 224-1647