



To: National Education Association
Fr: Lake Research Partners, ASO Communications & We Make The Future
Re: Summary of Key Findings from Online Survey
Date: October 19, 2021

This memo summarizes the key findings and messaging recommendations from a recent national online messaging survey of N=1000 registered voters with oversamples of N=100 Black voters, N=100 Latinx voters, N=100 AAPI voters, state samples of N=200 voters in California, Maryland, North Carolina, and Washington State, and a convenience sample of members. See page 8 for the additional details on the survey methodology.

Purpose of Education

- Overall, voters see the purpose of education as (1) imparting the skills needed to pursue jobs and careers, (2) ensuring that children in families struggling to make ends meet can get the same education as children in wealthy families, and (3) learning from mistakes, especially in the context of history lessons, in order to navigate challenges and create a better future.
- We can and should talk about skills, including *critical thinking skills*, and also not stop there. This is the top purpose of education, and a sentiment shared across audiences. However, tapping into skills alone does not assure that we are making the case for our policies because it is also a top value for opposition voters, who reject our approach to education.¹ We need to connect skill building to other values that are equally strong with our base and persuadables, such as helping children pursue their dreams and ensuring that “children in families struggling to make ends meet can get the same education as children in wealthy families.”
- Facing challenging situations, correcting mistakes, and reckoning with our past are effective formulations for presenting the purpose of education in a way that contends with anti-critical race theory (CRT) attacks and make the case for the kind of curriculum we favor. In this, connecting the past – when discussing history teaching – to our desired future stands out as an approach.
- Focus groups revealed that most people talk about public education using individualistic language, about the impacts to a child or student, rather than to society. We set out in the survey to assess whether framing the beneficiary as “children” or as “our country” impacts support for increased funding. Overall, there is no statistically significant impact on views toward funding in either formulation. We do, however, increase the view among our base that funding should be increased when we profile “country,” suggesting that expressing the purpose of education through a collective frame increases the priority our base places on funding. Although beyond the

¹ “Base,” “Persuadable,” and “Opposition” voter groups are defined based on how respondents answered 4 questions in the survey. See page 8 for a complete explanation.

scope of what was presently surveyed, it is worth further exploration into whether collectivizing the payoff of education also helps bolster the argument for not just increased but also more equitably distributed funding.

School Closings

- Majorities of voters believe that when a school is failing, it should receive the support needed to ensure that every child can receive a quality education. We win this argument easily against the alternatives of both closing a struggling school or providing parents with vouchers. This has been true for some time and is even stronger today.
- A few demographics are more responsive to calls for vouchers, such as younger Latinos and younger Black voters. A third of each agree more that *“parents should be given a voucher to attend the school of their choice”* if a school is struggling, instead of *“the school should receive the support needed to ensure that every child can receive a quality education.”* This is still a minority position, and voters across demographics prefer the latter option.

Equity and Funding

- A 55 percent majority of voters think that funding for public schools in their state should be increased. Views differ by party lines, as 73 percent of Democrats say funding should be increased, 3 percent say it should be decreased, and 18 percent say it should stay the same. Among Republicans, 41 percent say funding should be increased, 9 percent say it should be decreased, and 41 percent say it should stay the same.
- People who want to increase school funding are overwhelmingly OK with personally paying higher taxes to do so. More than 4 in 5 of voters (81 percent) who say funding should be increased hold that view even if it meant they (personally) had to pay more in taxes. Similarly, more than 4 in 5 of voters (82 percent) who say funding should be increased hold that view if it meant having the richest households and large corporations pay more in state taxes.
- We bolster our calls for equitable funding by contending with right-wing dog whistles blaming parents and teachers.
 - However, persuadable voters are cross-pressured. When we ask voters to choose between funding equity and the opposition suggestion that spending more money on failing schools won't help if the parents aren't more involved, we divide persuadables nearly evenly.
 - We win when we connect the idea of equity to deliberate division, *“Certain politicians try to turn us against schools and teachers, or point the finger at parents, to keep us from coming together to demand that every school gets the resources to provide every child a quality education, not just the children of the wealthy few.”* Half of persuadables agree, 13 points more than those who credit an opposition argument about parenting and teachers.
- Across racial lines, evoking freedom as an aspirational value increases agreement with expressions of equity against opposition claims about parental freedom and choice. Talking

about the “*freedom for children to pursue their dreams*” wins by big margins. Indeed, making children the protagonists in freedom-based framing is more effective than casting teachers in this role by discussing their freedom to determine what they teach.

- We win 65-27 when we frame equity through an aspirational goal that names freedom: “Most of us believe all children should have the freedom to pursue their dreams so we must equip every school with the resources to deliver quality education that prepares every child for the future, no matter their color, background or zip code.” We win this among persuadables by a 67-23 margin.
- When we don’t explicitly name freedom, we win by a lower 57-36 margin overall and 58-32 with persuadables with a statement that begins “Most of us believe where you live shouldn’t limit how far you can go...” before ending the same as the statement above. Voters agree with both of these statements more than an opposition argument that says, “*We need to give parents the freedom to choose where and how their kids learn and that means expanding charter schools and providing parents with vouchers to help them afford the school that is best for their child.*”

Critical Race Theory

- Just over half (53 percent) of voters have heard of critical race theory (CRT), with opposition voters more likely to have heard about it. While CRT is not being taught in K-12, gauging responses to this proposition provides us important insights. Prior to reading any information about the topic, we found voters unsure of their support for teaching CRT, with over a third in support (34 percent), just under a third opposed (29 percent), and a plurality (37 percent) of voters neutral or unsure.
- Simply defining CRT as “*a way to explore and analyze the role race and racism has played in our society*” increases support for teaching it from 34 to 40 percent. That information alone moves Latinas, AAPI women, Black women, weak Democrats, and younger Democrats more than others. Weak Republicans and Republicans under 50 are most likely to move toward the opposition after reading that description.
- Arguments in favor of banning CRT largely fall flat. Their strongest argument is that CRT “*brings politics into the classroom and divides our country.*” However, only 54 percent say this is convincing; 34 percent say it is very convincing.
- Three arguments stand out as convincing from our side against the bans:
 - First, saying “*children deserve an honest and accurate education*” works with voters across demographics. Further defining this as “*children deserve an honest and accurate education that enables them to learn from the mistakes of our past to help create a better future*” resonates strongly with our base and persuadables, while marginalizing opposition voters. When we leave out mention of learning from the mistakes of our past, opposition voters likely hear the demand for honest and accurate education as in *support* of the bans instead of against them.

- Secondly, voters find it convincing when we link learning from and avoiding past mistakes with a future aspiration: *“To prepare children for the future, we need to teach them both the good and the bad of our history so we can avoid making the same mistakes.”*
- Thirdly, positioning bans as shortchanging children of the skills they need for the future proves effective. Our base and persuadables respond to the idea that *“these bans shortchange [children] from developing critical thinking skills.”*
- Arguments that center educators are not as effective, even among members. Saying *“we need to give teachers the freedom to determine what and how to teach, not censor them”* or *“we need to trust teachers and curriculum development experts to determine what and how to teach, not censor them”* are lower-tier statements in opposition to bans.

Linking CRT to Equity

- When we criticize politicians solely on CRT – as *“whitewashing history to control a political narrative”* – everyone across demographics agrees, including our opposition. The idea of controlling a political narrative emerged in focus groups as a way to talk about the politicians who are seeking these bans; however, it is a contested space that reflects much of the existing right-wing rhetoric.
- However, when we juxtapose educators with politicians, framing the latter as wanting to exclude certain kids – both by denying funding and by writing people out of history books – our base, Democrats, and persuadables all agree strongly. Only opposition voters move away. For example:
 - Educators want to provide every child an accurate and quality education, while politicians *want to whitewash parts of our history so they can control a political narrative.*
 - Educators want to provide every child an accurate and quality education, while politicians *want to exclude certain kids, denying their schools funding and writing people who look like them out of our history books.*
- Linking CRT to the debate around masks and vaccines also resonates strongly with our base and persuadables, as well as Democrats. *“Educators are working hard to provide a quality education, while the same politicians opposing masks and lying about vaccines refuse to equitably fund our schools, and deny resources to certain schools that communities, parents and kids want to improve.”*

Messaging and Movement

- We tested a “softer” opposition message than their current, largely unpersuasive vitriol around CRT, and it proved strong with persuadables and even some of our base voters. It is a warning that even with our advantages on CRT and funding, there is appeal in evoking racial dog whistles in conjunction with the narrative that the way to improve public schools is to remove underperforming teachers.
- Despite this, we have two effective messages that garner strong agreement with our base and which regression analysis shows increases support for CRT, more education funding and even the likelihood of people to attend their school board meeting.

- “Future” is the most convincing message with Latinx voters, and it is tied for most convincing with Black and Democratic voters. It is tied for most convincing of our messages with persuadable voters, though still short of the opposition message, and is among the top messages with base voters.
 - *“School is a place where childhood happens. A place where kids from different places and races learn to understand the present and prepare for the future. But the same politicians who have denied children the education they deserve based on their color, background, or learning ability, now want to censor the lessons children receive. They push bans to whitewash our history, denying children an honest education that equips them to shape a better future. Together, we can demand every child have the same quality education we want for our own and finally give all of our schools the resources they need by speaking up at meetings, contacting our elected leaders, and voting in every election from school board to Senate.”*
- “Tell Hard Truths” is the top message with base, AAPI, and Democratic voters. It is tied for most convincing with Black voters. It also has the highest dial rating with Latinx voters.
 - *“No matter our color, background, or zip code, we want our children to have an education that imparts honesty about who we are, integrity in how we treat others, and courage to do what’s right. But for years, certain politicians have denied many children the quality education they deserve. Now those same politicians want to control what kids learn in class, excluding important figures like Martin Luther King Jr. from our history because they stood up to racism and pushed to change our country for the better. By joining together and speaking up at school board meetings and voting in local elections, we can make our schools places where every child belongs and can thrive, and this a country where we respect and support each other across our differences.”*
- We looked at several pre and post measures across messages as well. First, we re-assessed if people think funding should be increased and their support for CRT after they had heard the opposition message and just one of our messages. By this analysis, “Tell Hard Truths” moved persuadables toward believing education funding should be increased and also heightening support for teaching critical race theory.
- We also re-asked voters at the end of the survey after they had heard ALL of the messages. Regression analysis shows that “Tell Hard Truths” generated increased support for greater public school funding and for CRT. “Future” drove increased intent to show up to a school board meeting.
- On funding, we increase the percentage of people who think funding for public schools should be increased even if they had to pay more in taxes from 45 to 48 percent, increasing among base voters from 66 to 72 percent, and persuadable voters from 41 to 46 percent. We increased the percentage of people who think funding should be increased by having the rich pay more in taxes from 45 to 50 percent, among our base voters from 70 to 77 percent, and among persuadables from 42 to 46 percent.

- On CRT, we increase support by the end of the survey to 48 percent, up from an initial 34 percent (a further 8 point increase from the informed 40 percent support). We increased support from the informed support among base voters by 10 points, from 59 to 69, and among persuadables by 10 points, from 37 to 47.
- On engagement, there is little change in the percent who say they are extremely likely to attend a school board meeting, from 17 percent initially to 19 percent. But we do increase this among base voters, from an initial 21 percent to a final 27 percent.

Messaging Recommendations

- ✓ Assert the core purposes for education as means to create a better future: as overcoming challenges, ensuring that children in families struggling to make ends meet can get the same education as children in wealthy families, and imparting skills for the real world.
- ✓ Express the purpose of education through collective terms, as helping “our country,” to generate greater desire for increased funding among base voters.
 - “To help **our country** by providing children the skills they need to pursue the jobs and career they want.”
 - “To help **our country** reckon with the mistakes of our past so we can repair them and create a better future for all.”
 - “To help **our country** learn from mistakes in our past so we can solve problems in our future.”
- ✓ Express the outcomes of our desired policies as benefiting children, not schools.
 - “We need to change how we fund public schools, so that the **children** in communities that some politicians have shortchanged get the resources they need.”
- ✓ Characterize efforts to blame parents, teachers, and unions as a means to keep us from uniting for desirable, equitable outcomes.
 - **“Certain politicians try to turn us against schools and teachers, or point the finger at parents, to keep us from coming together** to demand that every school gets the resources to provide every child a quality education, not just the children of the wealthy few.”
- ✓ Contest opposition messaging on parental choice by explicitly naming freedom for children in our vision for public schools.
 - **“Most of us believe all children should have the freedom to pursue their dreams** so we must equip every school with the resources to deliver quality education that prepares every child for the future, no matter their color, background or zip code.”

On Critical Race Theory

- ✓ Remember that despite the volume on the other side, we are on the winning side of this debate. Voters agree more with our values and our vision for public schools. In order to persuade the middle, we need to get our base engaged to match the volume of our opponents.

- ✓ **When we say what we are for, always connect it to outcomes.** When we don't connect our values to our outcomes, our message can be mistaken by some for our opposition's message.
 - "Children deserve an honest and accurate education *that enables them to learn from the mistakes of our past to help create a better future.*"

- ✓ **Connect the importance of *learning history to improving the future* when arguing against bans.** People understand the purpose of education through a future orientation.
 - "We need to teach children the truth of our history so they can reckon with our mistakes and *make our future more just and equitable.*"
 - "To *prepare children for the future*, we need to teach them both the good and the bad of our history so we can *avoid making the same mistakes.*"
 - "To *prepare children for the future*, we need to teach them both the good and the bad of our history so that they better understand the lives, cultures and experiences of different people."

- ✓ **Make curriculum about *children's futures* instead of about retaining teacher control.** Voters, and members alike, respond more to the importance of curriculum for children and protecting their freedom to pursue their dreams than to protecting the freedom of teachers to determine curriculum.

- ✓ **Remind voters that certain politicians drive the push for bans.** People don't want politicians making decisions on curriculum. The opposition is trying hard to present *parents* as the lead driving force. Going up against parents as messengers for the other side is our toughest terrain. We have to contest that space and call out politicians' motivations.

- ✓ **Link this fight to funding by talking about who the opposition excludes and remind people the politicians pushing bans also deny schools funding.** Our messages are stronger when we situate anti-CRT efforts within a larger context.
 - "Educators want to provide every child an accurate and quality education, while politicians want to exclude certain kids, denying their schools funding and writing people who look like them out of our history books."

- ✓ **Characterize the politicians behind these bans as the same politicians blocking masks and lying about vaccines.**
 - "Educators are working hard to provide a quality education, while the same politicians opposing masks and lying about vaccines refuse to equitably fund our schools, and deny resources to certain schools that communities, parents and kids want to improve."

- ✓ **Empower people with a clear call to action that has concrete steps they can take to combat cynicism.** In focus groups and the dial testing, messaging that tells people the steps they can take provides a sense of efficacy and helps beat back cynicism.
 - "By joining together and *speaking up at school board meetings and voting in local elections*, we can make our schools places where every child belongs and can thrive, and this a country where we respect and support each other across our differences."

- “Together, we can demand every child have the same quality education we want for our own and finally give all of our schools the resources they need ***by speaking up at meetings, contacting our elected leaders, and voting in every election from school board to Senate.***”

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Survey Methodology

Lake Research Partners designed and administered this survey that was conducted online from September 24 – October 1, 2021. The survey reached a total of 1000 registered voters nationwide with additional samples of 100 Black registered voters, 100 Latinx registered voters, and 100 Asian American and Pacific Islander voters nationwide as well as 200 registered voters in California, 200 registered voters in North Carolina, 200 registered voters in Maryland, and 200 registered voters in Washington. The data were weighted slightly by gender, region, region by gender, race and ethnicity, race and ethnicity by gender, and party identification. The margin of error for the total sample is +/- 3.1 percentage points.

This memo references data collected in a convenience sample of members in Washington State and North Carolina. Interviews of members from each state were combined into one aggregate dataset that weighted to an effective sample size of N=200 in each state. This survey will be administered to members in Maryland and California, and the analysis will be updated to reflect their views upon completing fielding.

Defining Base, Persuadable, and Opposition

Throughout this memo we reference three groups: base, persuadable, and opposition voters. These groups are based on respondents attitudes toward money in public education, what determines student success, how government should fund schools, and views toward teachers’ unions.

Base voters, who comprise 28 percent of voters, believe that:

1. Providing more resources to the schools that need the most help ensures every child can get a quality education. And:
2. Whether children do well is largely due to attending schools with more resources, experienced teachers, nicer facilities, and more engaging classes. And:
3. Schools should be funded so that each child, regardless of their zip code, has an equal right to a quality education. Or:
4. They have a very or somewhat favorable view of teachers’ unions.

Opposition voters, who comprise 18 percent of voters, believe that:

1. Spending more taxpayer money on failing schools will not help if the parents in those communities are not involved in their children’s education. And:
2. Whether children do well is largely due to how hard they work and how much more involved their parents are in motivating them. And:
3. Schools should be funded based on local property taxes so that each specific community can determine what is best for the children in it. Or:
4. They have a very or somewhat unfavorable view of teachers’ unions.

Persuadable voters, who comprise 54 percent of voters, by definition share some views with base voters and some views with opposition voters.