

Understanding Parent Expectations and Concerns about their Children Returning to School

Findings from Listening Sessions with
Parents in 9 U.S. States

August 2021



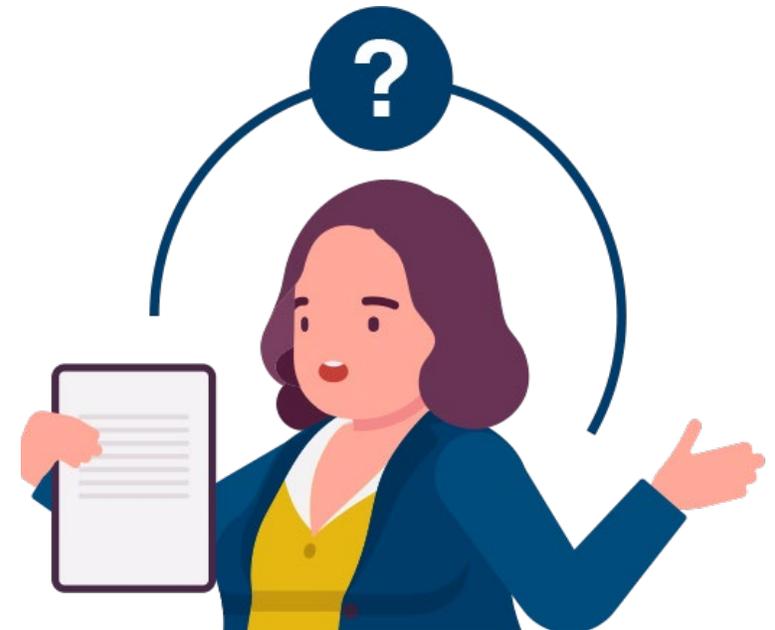
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PURPOSE

A year and a half into the global COVID-19 pandemic, parents across the country are sending their children back to school. Through a grant from the CDC Foundation awarded to the National PTA, HCM Strategists was asked to facilitate virtual listening sessions with a diverse group of parents in English and Spanish to *better understand their concerns, fears and expectations related to the upcoming school year*. The listening sessions serve as a companion to the national survey administered between July 23 and August 18. The goal is to bring to life the survey with stories, verbatims and observations that capture where parents are at this moment in time.



RESEARCHER'S NOTE

Parents, especially parents of young children and parents of color, are not ok. They are struggling to protect their kids from COVID and mental distress; they are trying to ensure their kids can still learn; they are trying to do their part to help their communities return to safety; they are trying to manage households and keep and do their jobs. They deserve our deepest empathy, and we must do better meeting them where they are.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

1.

Parents appreciate the need to maintain a healthy economy, but they question when it is used as a rationale for re-opening public schools to in-person learning.

3.

When it comes to communication and guidance, parents trust individuals they've personally known for a long time, especially their family physician and pediatrician.

2.

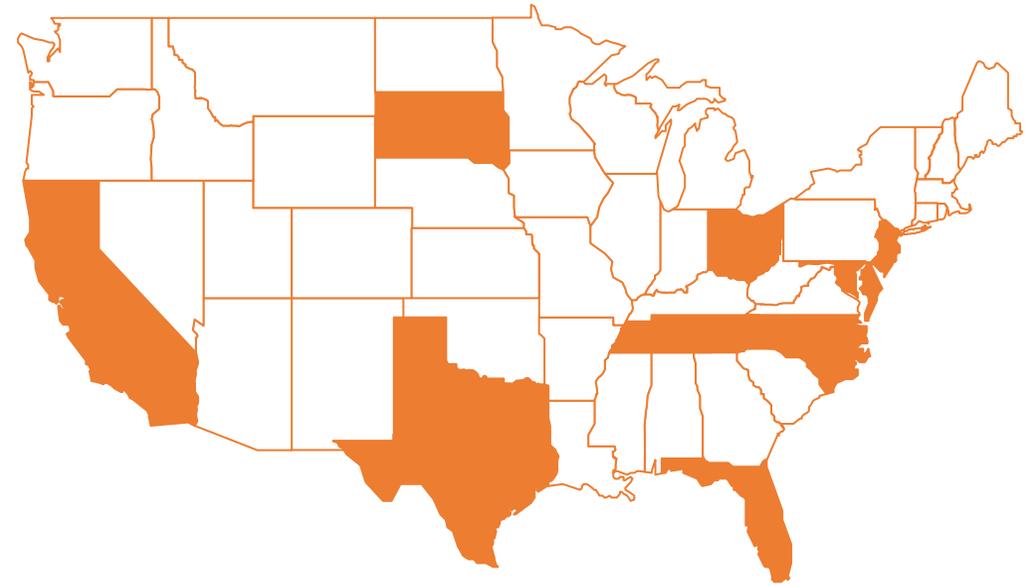
Parents respect vaccine choice and are concerned about the bullying and stigmatizing of students based on vaccine status. Therefore, parents want COVID precautions to apply to everyone equally, not just a subset of students and staff.

4.

Most parents see the value of in person learning while also expressing concerns about sending their kids back to school; this includes concerns about both physical and mental health.

METHODOLOGY

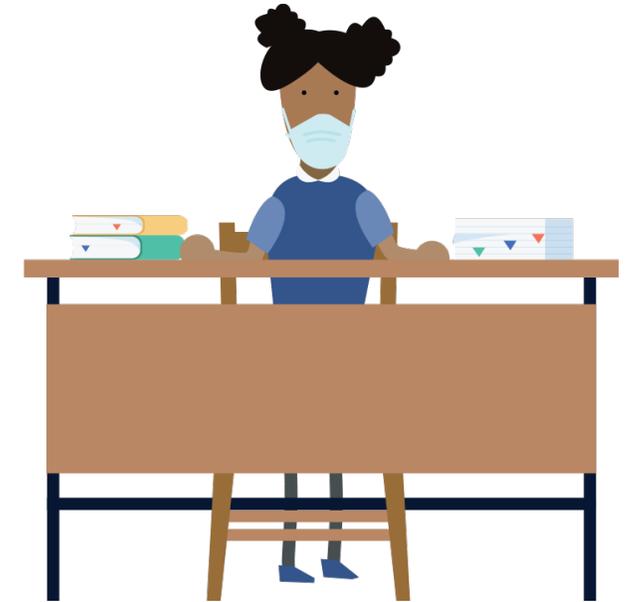
- 9 hour-long listening sessions were conducted across 9 states: July 12-August 18
- 7 sessions were conducted in English, 2 sessions were conducted in Spanish
- Listening sessions included a mix of gender, race and ethnicity
- Listening sessions included public school parents of students from K-12



Parents were recruited in partnership with state PTA leadership and non-profits focused on family engagement

QUESTION AREAS

1. Understand the concerns parents/guardians, *a.k.a.*, the participants, have about returning to school this year with particular focus on their children's COVID-related health.
2. Uncover the extent to which participants access and find value in COVID-related guidance.
3. Understand what would make the participants feel more comfortable with the health risks associated with full-time in person learning.
4. Understand how those communicating with parents regularly about COVID-related health can better understand messaging and language to improve their ability to meet parents where they are.
5. Better understand parent experiences with the execution of safety guidance and ways it has impacted their perceptions of school over the past year.
6. Surface differences between vaccinated students and families and non-vaccinated students and families in expectations around COVID-related guidance.



FINDINGS AND PARENT MINDSETS

The predominant feeling going into Back to School is **nervous**
....although some are **cautiously optimistic**



FINDINGS AND PARENT MINDSETS

Parents are conflicted about their child(ren) going back to school... even though they recognize the benefits.

"We're ready and excited. They cried everyday and received therapy." - White NJ parent

"I feel like I am between a rock and a hard place. I would prefer to send my kids to online school but one of the prerequisites is having a medical condition. So, I feel like my only option is to send them" - Latina CA parent

"[I'm feeling] anxious and nervous and knowing there's an unknown but seeing how happy [my daughter] is to be around other kids in a regular environment makes sending her back worth it." - White NC parent



"I feel that she's safe [because she is vaccinated] but I am concerned about the social distancing aspect that they really can't do with all those kids, and I'm concerned with all the other kids and teachers who are not vaccinated" - White TN parent

FINDINGS AND PARENT MINDSETS

The biggest concern is about their child(ren) contracting COVID.

"I know if they got it, they would survive, but I'm worried about the long-lasting effects." - White MD parent

"I am a pulmonary patient; I have 40% function in my lungs, and I just went through COVID. I cannot get it again. I was vaccinated and I got it! The cases here are pretty bad and kids are unvaccinated. There are not even enough beds for the kids." - Latina TX parent

"[H]aving to relive our own personal experience; I had COVID pneumonia... having experienced that and knowing what it was like and essentially being somewhat helpless because there's only so much you can do, and I don't want to experience that again in any form or fashion." - Black NC parent

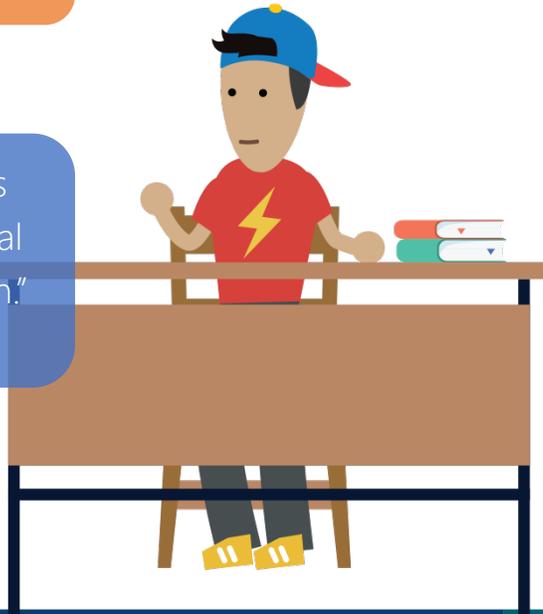


FINDINGS AND PARENT MINDSETS

Although, for those parents who believe their child is not “ok” emotionally, they prioritize social and emotional health above all else.

“Meeting mental health needs is the new hot lunch; you can’t teach without it.” -
White CA parent

“We have to listen to the children as well; it was good for my child’s mental health to go back for summer session.”
- Latina CA parent



“[F]rom a mental health perspective, there's always such a push on getting back...but if you don't stop and take stock of what happened and rebuild relationships then [inaudible]. Then there's changes too. Personally, my [daughter] is questioning her gender and that was something; she stopped seeing her classmates and a full year went by and now she's gonna come back, she's gonna look different, and she's gonna talk different. So on a personal level I'm thinking of bullying issues. But it's also a mental health issue and overall anxiety. My daughter was very anxious and she gets very anxious when we go out to places. Now she's vaccinated and her anxiety went down but I always have to watch her anxiety levels.” - Latina CA parent

FINDINGS AND PARENT MINDSETS

Parents, especially those of color, expressed distrust in the implementation of government and school district protocols.

"It is very negligent of the government and school district to not take the temperature of kids. It is a common symptom. The mayor is doing OK, but the governor of Texas is not doing anything." - Latina TX parent

"It feels like [many don't] understand the American school system. You can't have 3 ft and have everyone in the school building." - Black MD parent



"There is unequal treatment of schools where the parents demand and where they don't. At my school I demand actively but at my niece's school the ventilation and cleaning are terrible. They have fewer resources." - Latina CA parent

"As a minority, the word 'random' [re: testing] triggers me because the word random at the airport or by police is not random, they're trying to profile someone, and you're just using it as a way to justify it." - Latina CA parent

"The schools are supposed to follow protocols but who knows if they will." - Latina TX parent

FINDINGS AND PARENT MINDSETS

Parents don't trust other parents to keep their kids home or follow protocols

"It's been confusing and requires a lot of trust in your neighbor to do what they're supposed to do. Even the whole my mask keeps you safe; your mask keeps me safe, a lot of that is putting trust in other people" - White MD parent

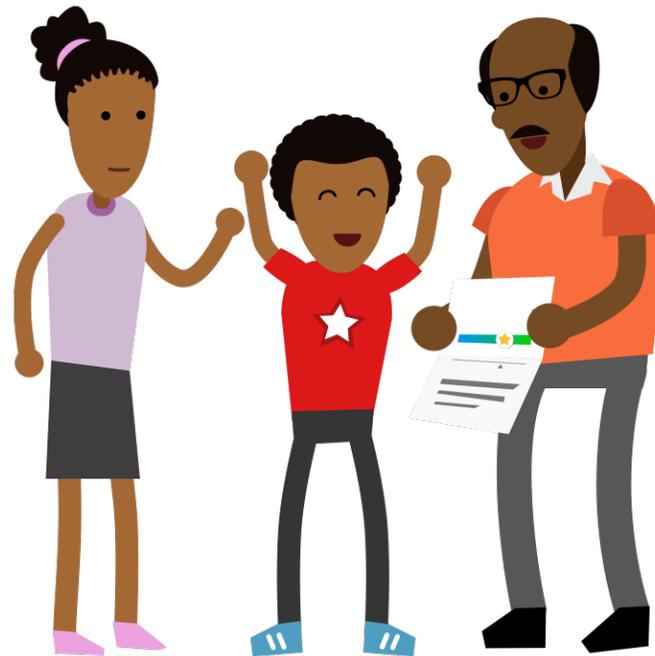


"[Last year] every morning we got asked the COVID question: Do you have this? Do you have that? And you had to [answer] before everyone was in or else you got the call from the Nurse - 'oh, you didn't say yes or no.... I would feel better if they kept that not just because of COVID because if you have the sniffles you should stay home. If you have a temperature of 99.5 and you're normally 97, stay home! It gives parents accountability and that's not something we've had before. I've seen parents dose up their kids with Tylenol and send them off to school." - White NJ parent

FINDINGS AND PARENT MINDSETS

Parents feel more comfortable when schools use precautions that seemed effective last year

"It makes me nervous that some people aren't taking the same precautions as last year."
- White OH parent



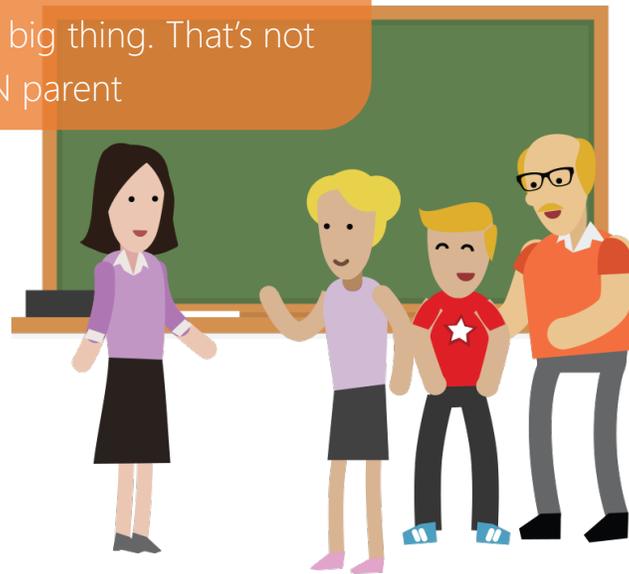
"The government will not [enforce guidelines], but we have to keep following the guidelines as we used to when the pandemic was in full effect." - Latina TX parent

"Last year when school was ending, and kids were still going to school, there was a nurse at the entrance taking the temperatures. They would ask the parents if the children had any symptoms and all that. There is none of that this year." - Latina TX parent

FINDINGS AND PARENT MINDSETS

In order to prevent bullying and stigmatizing based on vaccination status, parents want protocols to apply equally to all students and staff.

"Kids who are on free and reduced lunch don't have to announce that they're on free & reduced lunch, so they're not ostracized...if you ostracize unvaccinated kids in any way, that's gonna be a big thing. That's not gonna fly." - White TN parent



"I think it's unfair [to require only some students to wear masks.] It opens that door for bullying. It opens the door for bullies. It opens the door for your child feeling unsafe. They don't want to go back to school if they are unvaccinated." - White NJ parent

"I agree with masks for all or masks for none." - Asian NJ parent

FINDINGS AND PARENT MINDSETS

Parents conditionally support asymptomatic testing

“Unless there’s a reason for testing, I don’t think we should just be random testing.” - White MD parent

- Parent support is limited to when testing is part of *contact tracing* and, less so, for participation in activities that involve *heavy breathing* or when transmission rates in the school/community spike high.



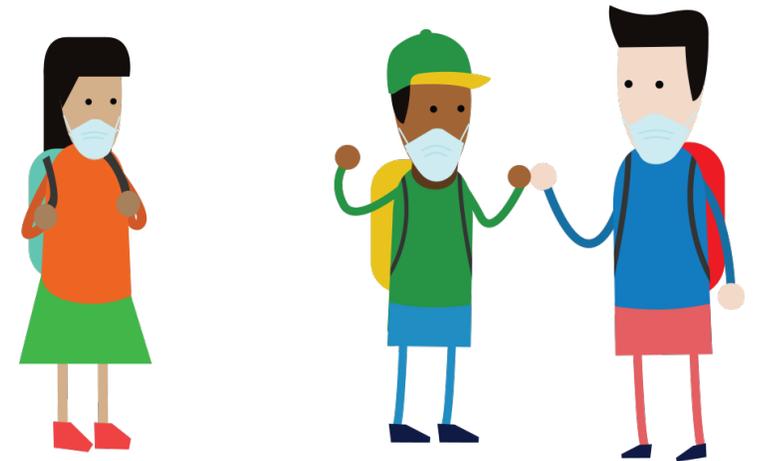
FINDINGS AND PARENT MINDSETS

Parents generally trust COVID related guidance when it's issued by experts in organizations viewed as apolitical, though some found the guidance confusing and inconsistent.

- Many parents who don't trust the guidance did at some point in time.

"It's not super helpful; I read it at the beginning of the pandemic." - White SD parent

"It changed so often it was hard to keep up...what was fact in November is no longer fact in January, or what was recommended...and I know it was numbers, I know it was going by numbers and cases, but it was very hard to keep up with...some things did not make sense to me. I know restaurants opening, you could do this but you couldn't do that, everything had to close at 10 o'clock, as if COVID went away at 10 o'clock at night...you could be in the restaurant eating at a table but they had to close at 10 o'clock...because... for whatever the reason. Some things just did not make sense to me. I tried to keep up as best I could!" - White NJ parent



FINDINGS AND PARENT MINDSETS

Some parents suggested that when guidance defers to economic health, it undermines their confidence in it.

"How is it possible to not require the use of masks but all the dance clubs are full and unmasked" - Latina TX parent



"I understand the importance of keeping an economy going and managing health, but for me restaurants and bars being open while schools are closed was completely the opposite of what I think it should have been." - Asian NJ parent

BARRIERS TO VACCINATION AND IN PERSON LEARNING

- The fertility myth: We repeatedly heard concerns around the vaccine having the potential to cause infertility based on misinformation around the HPV vaccine.
- Historical mistrust in the Black community surrounding vaccines: Black leaders and family engagement experts continue to surface that government sponsored vaccinations are a barrier for many Black parents.
- Concerns around old HVAC systems circulating the virus: We repeatedly heard from parents, particularly in under-resourced schools, that their school building was not safe. Updating HVAC systems and improving ventilation is one of the top things parents want schools to spend funds on.
- The vaccine is too “new”: Parents expressed concerns there could be unknown and long-term side effects associated with the vaccine.

"I think you're pressuring parents to do something that they probably aren't comfortable doing. The vaccine is still so new, especially with my younger kids, my biggest fear is finding out that this vaccine has X, Y, & Z long-term effects, and now my daughter can't have kids later in life...I'm not an anti-vaxxer by any stretch of the imagination. This is different. This is still too new." – White NJ Parent

"I would like to see funding used on updating and renovating HVAC systems and things like that, just to make healthier buildings." - White MD parent

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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