

# Californians and Public Education: Views from the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier Poll

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## Executive Summary

With a new Governor, State Superintendent, and Legislators in Sacramento and a diminished federal role in education, there is an opportunity for California's leaders to take stock of recent educational reforms and make necessary improvements. This report presents findings from a state-representative poll of California registered voters on an array of education policy issues. Based on our analysis, we have identified nine major findings:

1. Across the full span of education issues facing California voters, the number one concern is gun violence in schools, and voters are supportive of a wide array of policy solutions to this problem. They strongly oppose arming teachers, however.
2. Voters are also deeply worried about college affordability, which is the second most cited concern. This worry extends across demographic groups, and voters are also not overly confident that earning a college degree will lead to a middle-class life. That belief may be reinforced by their concerns about affordability.
3. Voters are supportive of increased investment in early childhood education, but their support is far from overwhelming and is lower than support for initiatives to improve K–12 or higher education. Voters express a modest preference for universal (as opposed to targeted) early childhood investment.
4. Voters are only slightly more aware of the Local Control Funding Formula than they were in previous polls, but participation in LCFF activities has increased. While both awareness and participation remain quite low, voters remain enthusiastic and supportive of the law.
5. There was close to zero increase in awareness and use of the California School Dashboard, and awareness and use remain low, even among parents. Voters prefer the revamped Dashboard that was recently launched over the previous version, and they remain supportive of the ideas behind the Dashboard.
6. Perhaps because of their support for high-profile education policies, voters are somewhat more optimistic about the state of California schools than they were last year. This is especially true for parents.
7. Voters strongly support teachers' right to strike, even when presented with a description emphasizing the possible negative consequences for students and their families.
8. Voters strongly support a proposed constitutional amendment that is likely to appear on the 2020 ballot that would amend Proposition 13 to introduce annual re-assessments for business and commercial (but not residential) property.
9. Voters are ambivalent about affirmative action when it is described using that name, but they are supportive of the idea that students from different groups should be given advantages in college admissions. They are especially favorable to the idea of offering admission preferences to low-income students. They strongly oppose offering admissions preferences to children of donors, which many institutions now do.

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## Introduction

With a new Governor, State Superintendent, and Legislators in Sacramento and a diminished federal role in education, there is an opportunity for California's leaders to take stock of recent educational reforms and make necessary improvements. Several high-profile reforms over the past few years, including the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) and the California School Dashboard, have meaningfully reshaped California public education. Recently, *Getting Down to Facts II*,<sup>1</sup> a research project involving over 100 researchers across the state and the nation, showed that these reforms have resulted in improvements, but that many changes are still needed to address persistent achievement gaps. Specifically, the results suggested that additional investments are needed to build system capacity, to strengthen early education, and to increase funding and reduce financial burdens locally. As new policies are put into place to address these challenges, it is important that leaders learn from the public about their preferences to ensure these policies are successfully implemented.

There are also a host of new and looming issues in K–12 and higher education that may draw the attention of the Governor and state legislators. For example, there is a high-profile court case before the U.S. Supreme Court that may limit universities' abilities to use race as a factor in admissions decisions. The Governor has signaled an interest in expanding early childhood education in California. And gun violence in schools remains a hot button issue after the most recent large-scale shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

As California's leaders confront these and other issues, where do California voters and parents stand on education and education policy? Which issues would they like to see tackled, and which are they less focused on? This report presents findings from a state-representative poll of California registered voters on an array of education policy issues. (Methodological details on the poll are in the appendix.) The poll was led by researchers at the University of Southern California Rossier School of Education and Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) and was conducted by Tulchin Research. The PACE/USC Rossier poll has generally been conducted annually since 2012.<sup>2</sup> The questions in each wave are a mix of new and legacy questions meant to draw out voters' opinions on the most important educational issues of the day.

In this report, we summarize the major findings of the poll, presenting overall means as well as some differences in responses across core demographic groups.<sup>3</sup> Based on our analysis, we have identified nine major findings.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://gettingdowntofacts.com>

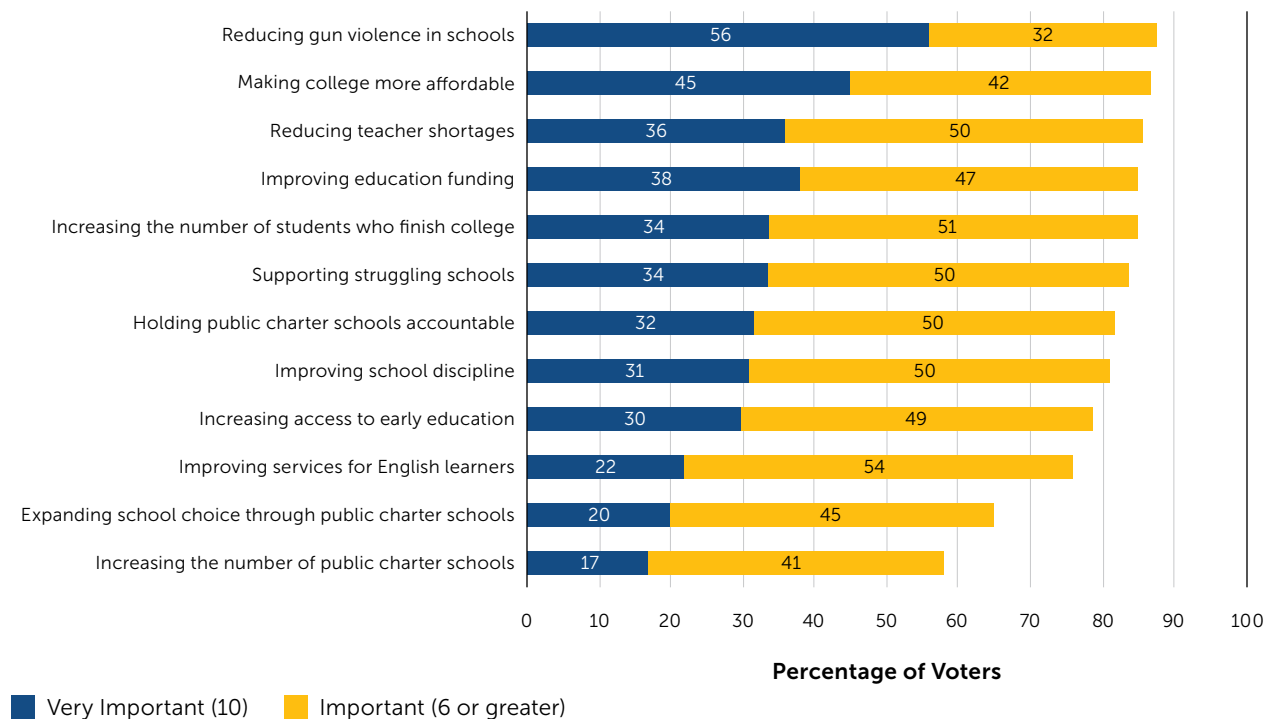
<sup>2</sup> Findings from all prior PACE/USC Rossier polls are available on the PACE website: <https://edpolicyinca.org/polls>

<sup>3</sup> The full results are available at <https://www.edpolicyinca.org/projects/pace-and-usc-rossier-poll-2019>

## Finding 1: Gun Violence in Schools is the Top Issue for Voters

California voters are deeply concerned about gun violence in schools. We asked voters how important they thought an array of 11 educational issues were on a scale of 1 (not at all important) to 10 (very important), and “reducing gun violence in schools” was the top-rated issue. Fifty-six percent of California voters rated this item as a 10 on the 1-to-10 scale, and 88 percent rated it 6 or higher (see Figure 1). Concern about gun violence cuts across all demographic groups in California. Gun violence was the top-rated issue among Democrats (66 percent rated it “very important”) and among Republicans (42 percent). It was the top-rated issue for White (55 percent), Latinx (56 percent), African American (71 percent), and Asian (53 percent) voters.

**Figure 1.** Highest Priority Education Issues for California Voters

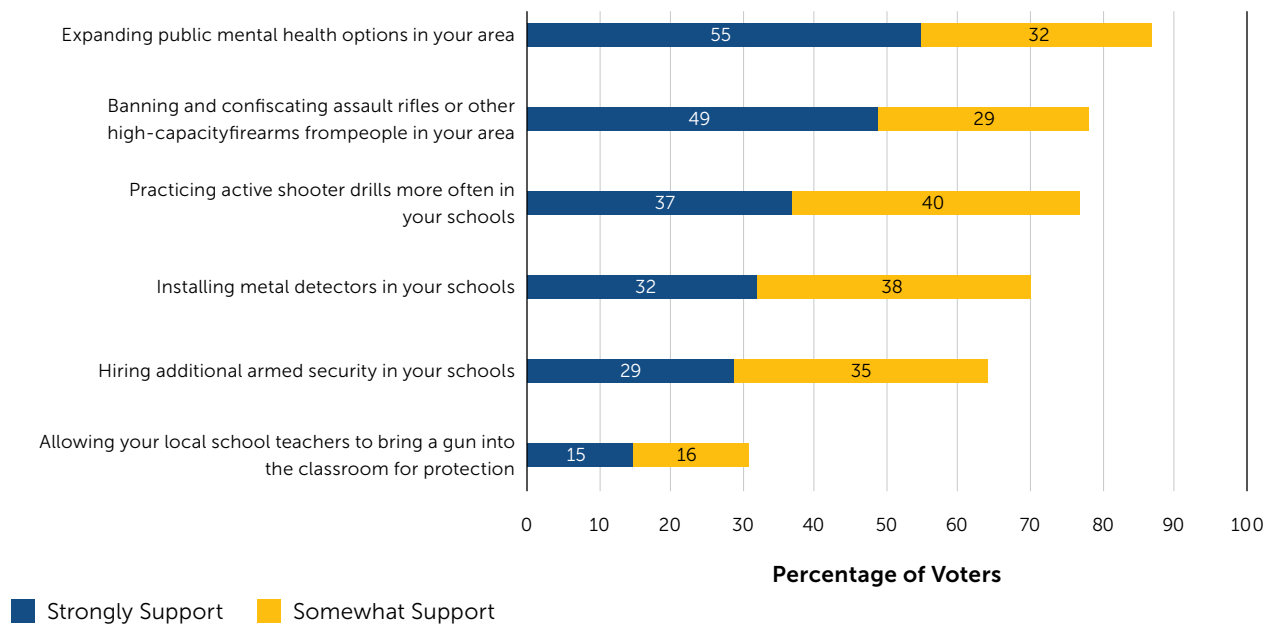


We also asked voters about six possible policies aimed at reducing the risk of gun violence in schools, and voters expressed strong opinions in support of or opposition to many of these (see Figure 2). The policy receiving the strongest support was “expanding public mental health options in your area,” with 87 percent in support (55 percent strongly) and just 9 percent in opposition (2 percent strongly). There was also majority support for “practicing active shooter drills more often in your schools,” “installing metal detectors in your schools,” “banning and confiscating assault rifles or other high-capacity firearms from people in your area,” and “hiring additional armed security in your schools.” There was majority support for these ideas across political parties, but Republicans were

least enthusiastic about banning and confiscating guns, with just 50 percent support and 44 percent opposition.

In contrast, there was strong opposition to one proposed policy: “allowing your local school teachers to bring a gun into the classroom for protection” (31 percent support, 63 percent oppose, of which 46 percent oppose strongly). Here again there was a partisan split, with Republicans favoring this policy 55 percent to 40 percent and Democrats opposing it 76 percent to 19 percent.

**Figure 2.** Support for Various Measures to Reduce Gun Violence

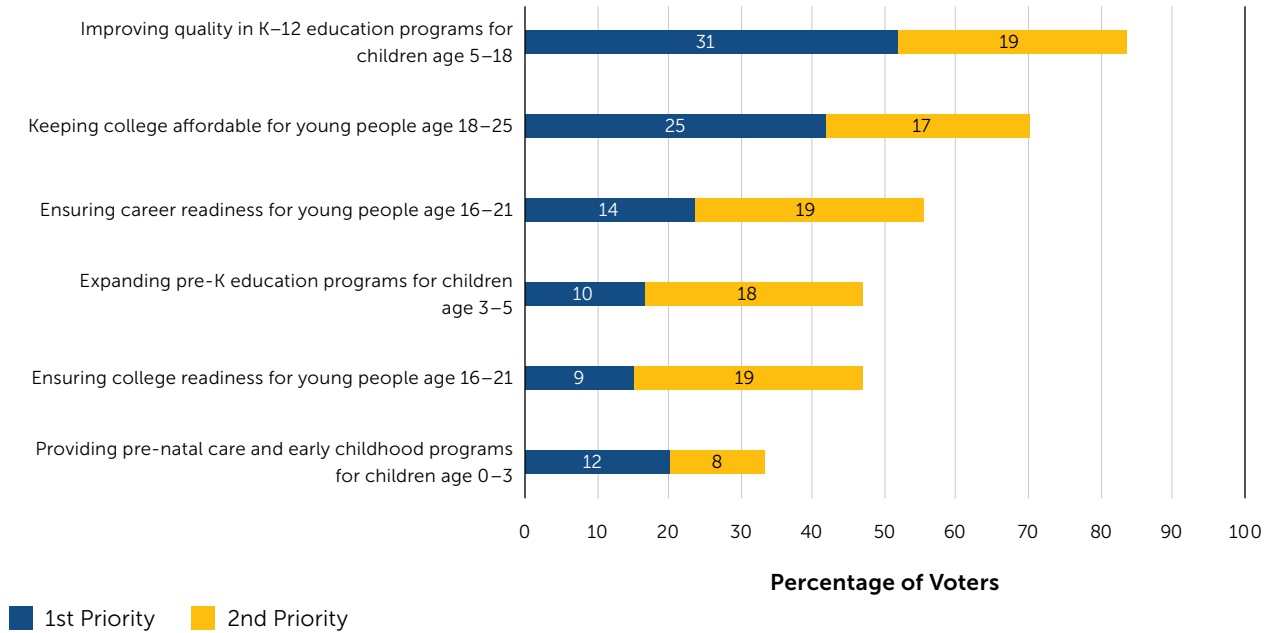


## Finding 2: Voters are Concerned about College Affordability

According to voters, the second-most important issue, out of 11 we asked about (see Figure 1), is “making college more affordable.” Forty-five percent of voters rated this item a 10 on a 1-to-10 scale, and 87 percent rated it 6 or higher. College affordability was actually the top-rated issue by mean for certain demographic groups—all age ranges within 18 to 49, voters with children, and voters with incomes below \$35,000.

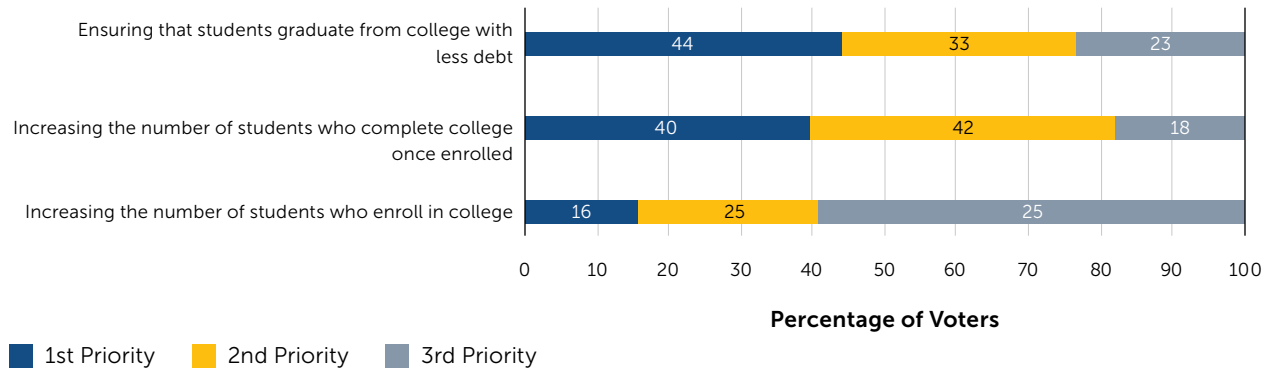
There are two other elements that highlight the need to address college affordability. We asked about six possible educational priorities for the new Governor, and “keeping college affordable for young people 18–25” was the second-highest priority (after only “improving quality K–12 education programs for children 5–18”) (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Priority Ranking of Various Policies from “Cradle to Career”



We also asked voters what their preferences were for a college agenda focused on three possible goals: increasing enrollment, increasing completion, or ensuring students graduate with less debt. Graduating with less debt was the top-rated item by 44 percent of respondents, the highest of the three options (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4.** Voter Priorities in College Investment



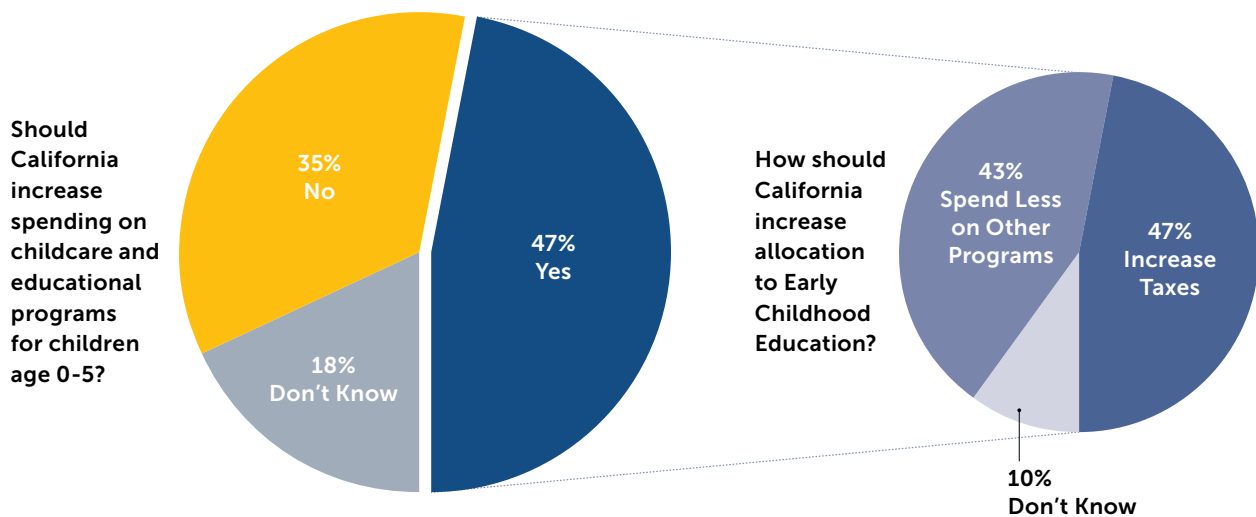
Perhaps in part because of concerns about college affordability, California voters are not fully persuaded that a college education will lead to a middle-class life. On a 1-to-10 scale, with 1 meaning “not at all certain” and 10 meaning “absolutely certain,” voters averaged just a 5.63 mean score on this item. Groups that have been historically underserved by higher education systems are more likely to agree with this concept, with African American voters averaging a 7.05 and Latinx 6.11, versus 5.41 for White and 5.50 for Asian American voters.

### Finding 3: Early Childhood Education is Lower Priority for Voters

Early childhood education is one of Governor Gavin Newsom’s stated priorities, but California voters are less enthusiastic about this priority than many others (including the college affordability issues just discussed). As shown in Figure 3, when asked about six possible spending priorities for the new Governor (where K–12 quality came first and college affordability came second), two options for pre-kindergarten came in last and next-to-last. “Expanding pre-k programs for children 3–5” was next-to-last, with just 28 percent of voters listing it as their first or second priority, and “providing pre-natal and early childhood programs for children age 0–3” was last, with just 20 percent listing it as their first or second priority.

We asked a variety of other questions about support for pre-kindergarten policies, and we found moderate support for them all. For instance (as shown in Figure 5), just 47 percent of voters said California should increase spending on childcare and educational programs for children age 0–5, versus 35 percent who opposed. Those who supported increasing spending were evenly split (47 to 43) on whether those programs should be paid for by increasing taxes or spending less on other programs. Voters generally also did not express a strong opinion about whether early childhood education should be universal or targeted to the students most in need, nor did they have clear preferences with respect to pre-kindergarten teachers’ pay or qualifications.

**Figure 5.** Voter Willingness to Make Additional Investments in Early Childhood Education





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## **Finding 4: Support is High for the Local Control Funding Formula, Despite Low Awareness**

In 2013, the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF) marked an historic change in the way California funds its schools and makes education decisions. The LCFF and the related Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) process shift major decision-making authority over how to allocate resources to meet students' needs to the local level. Both the LCFF and LCAP process encourage the use of multiple measures of school performance used locally to support continuous improvement. Now in place for several years, awareness of the LCFF and LCAP process has increased since last year, but it remains low. This year, 25 percent of voters said they had heard or read a little or a lot about LCFF, up from 17 percent last year. Similarly, awareness of local LCAP meetings and activities has increased from 11 percent in 2016 to 21 percent this year. And reported participation in LCFF-related activities is also up, from 5 percent in 2016 to 11 percent this year. Despite the increases, these results show that both awareness and participation remain quite low.

Despite low participation, enthusiasm for the policy remains strong. Among those who have heard of LCFF, 61 percent have a positive view of the policy (versus 18 percent with a negative view). And when all respondents were offered a description of the policy, support was also high (62 percent supporting versus 22 percent in opposition). Support is down a bit, however, since we asked in 2016. That year support was 72 percent (versus 17 percent opposed) among those aware of the law, and it was 67 percent supporting and 18 percent opposed after we offered a description of the law.

Interestingly, though reported participation in the law is quite low, most California voters (58 percent) say they would like to be involved in decisions about education in their community. This is notable, because in a recent statewide representative survey nearly all superintendents reporting poor or average participation in LCFF (91 percent) attributed it, at least in part, to lack of interest on the part of local stakeholders.<sup>4</sup>

## **Finding 5: Familiarity with California School Dashboard is Low**

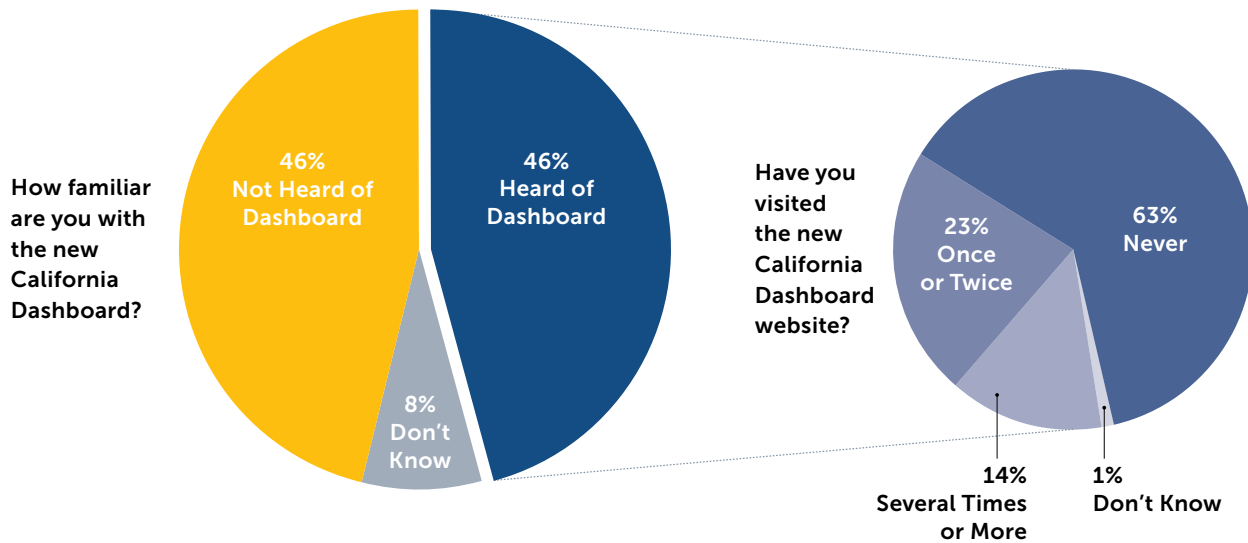
Voters are similarly unaware of another major California policy initiative—the California School Dashboard. The Dashboard replaces the well-known Academic Performance Index (API), which was used for over a decade to rate schools on academic performance. Awareness and use of the Dashboard have increased very slowly. We asked voters if they were familiar with the Dashboard, and just 46 percent said they were (only a 1 percent

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.edpolicyinca.org/publications/superintendents-speak>

increase over 2018's 45 percent). In total, 17 percent of California voters say they have been to the Dashboard, a modest increase over the 12 percent from 2018 (see Figure 6).

**Figure 6.** Voter Awareness and Use of the California School Dashboard



Note: Numbers may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Despite the lack of awareness and use of the Dashboard, voters remain enthusiastic about the new system. Those who say they have heard of the Dashboard are positive in their views (52 percent versus 15 percent with a negative view).

We randomly divided our sample and showed each half a different image of the Dashboard. The first half were shown an image of the Dashboard prior to its recent revision, and the second were shown an image of the new Dashboard. Voters strongly preferred the newer Dashboard, expressing positive views at a 65 percent rate, versus just 19 percent negative views. For the old Dashboard, positive views also outweighed negative views but only by 52 percent to 25 percent. In spite of the negative portrayal of the Dashboard among some educational advocates (e.g., Billy & Smith, 2018; Klein, 2018), voters seem to be pleased with it at similar levels to last year.

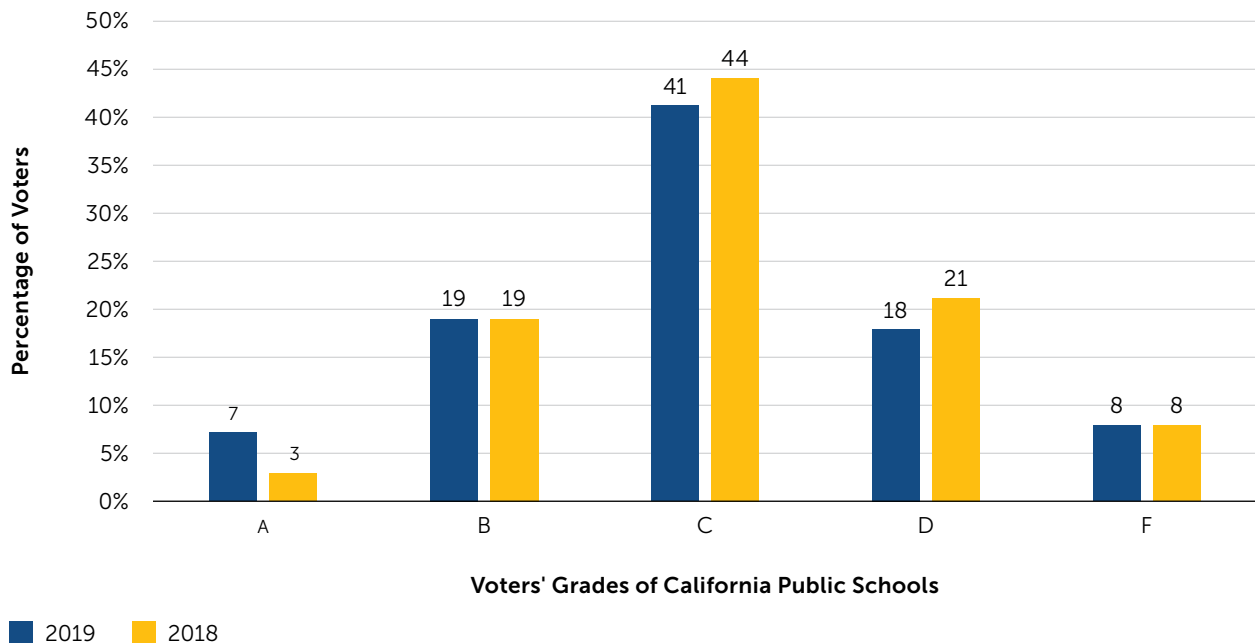
Parents' views and experiences may especially matter when it comes to the Dashboard. Awareness and use of the Dashboard are indeed greater for parents than for non-parents. Of voters with children in school, 65 percent have heard of the Dashboard (41 percent a fair amount or a good deal), versus just 39 percent (12 percent a fair amount or a good deal) of voters without children in school. Voters with children in school are much more likely to have visited the Dashboard, as well—40 percent versus 7 percent of voters without children in school. However, parent use has not increased much from last year, when it was 37 percent. Parents also hold especially positive views of the Dashboard

(72 percent of those who are aware of it have positive views, versus 14 percent with negative views) and of the new Dashboard when shown an image (80 percent positive views, 12 percent negative).

## Finding 6: Voters Have Increasingly Positive Views of California Schools

California voters, and especially parents, hold positive views of major education policies that are being implemented in the state. Perhaps because of this, there appears to be a slight uptick in Californians', and especially parents', view of the quality of California schools. When asked about *California* schools, as shown in Figure 7, the proportion of California voters giving them an A grade increased over last year, while the proportion giving them a C or D grade decreased. The changes represent a small but meaningful shift upward in ratings, and the proportion of A grades is higher than in any previous year. (We have asked this question every year since 2012; from 2012 to 2015 less than 2 percent of voters gave California schools an A.) Similarly, there is an uptick in grades for voters' *local public schools*, with 14 percent earning an A versus just 9 percent last year. Again, this is an all-time high on this question.

**Figure 7.** Voters' Grades of California Public Schools, in 2018 and 2019"

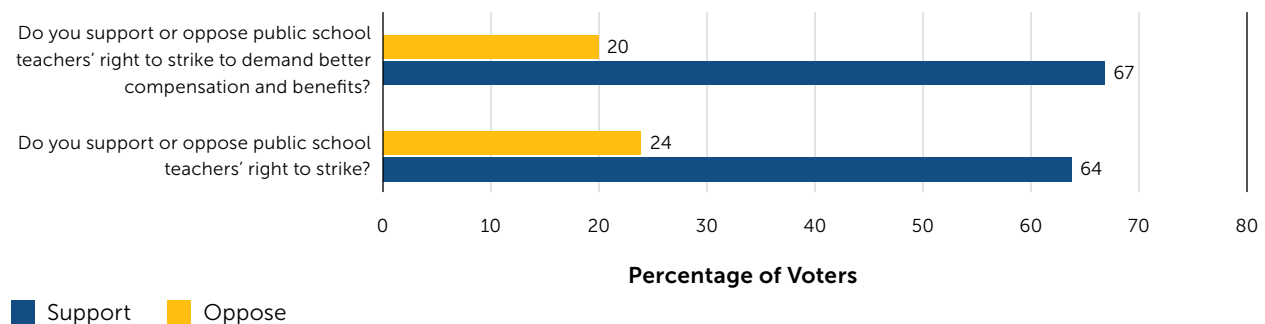


Parents are especially enthusiastic about California school performance, and even more so for their local schools (a trend that mirrors findings on previous PACE/USC Rossier and national polls, for parents and for all voters). Of respondents with children, 46 percent say California’s schools deserve an A or B versus 15 percent who say they deserve a D or F. In contrast, for non-parents just 16 percent say the schools deserve an A or B, versus 31 percent who say they deserve a D or F. When asked about local schools, 63 percent of parents say they deserve an A or B versus just 33 percent of non-parents. The parent numbers all represent sharp improvements from previous years; for instance, in 2016 parents’ grades for local public schools were 53 percent A/B and 13 percent D/F. In short, when you ask those who are most closely engaged with California’s schools how their schools are performing they express significantly more positive views than is typically thought, and their enthusiasm has been increasing over time.

### Finding 7: Voters Support Teachers’ Right to Strike

With high-profile strikes already happening in Los Angeles and on the horizon in other districts, what do voters think? In short, voters overwhelmingly support teachers’ right to strike. Depending on the question wording, support for teachers’ right to strike ranges from 64 percent supporting and 24 percent opposing to 67 percent supporting and 20 percent opposing (see Figure 8). Even when they are presented with the statement that such strikes could “disrupt the lives of families and hurt students,” voters support teachers’ rights 63 percent, compared to 29 percent that oppose.

**Figure 8.** Voter Support for Teachers’ Right to Strike



Though we did not ask about any specifics of the 2019 teacher strike in Los Angeles, we do see that voters in Los Angeles are even more supportive of teachers’ right to strike than voters elsewhere in the state.<sup>5</sup> LA voters support teachers’ right to strike 69 percent versus 17 percent opposing, as compared to 64 percent supporting and 24 percent opposing in the whole state. Parents are also more likely to support the right to strike (69/21) than non-parents (62/25).

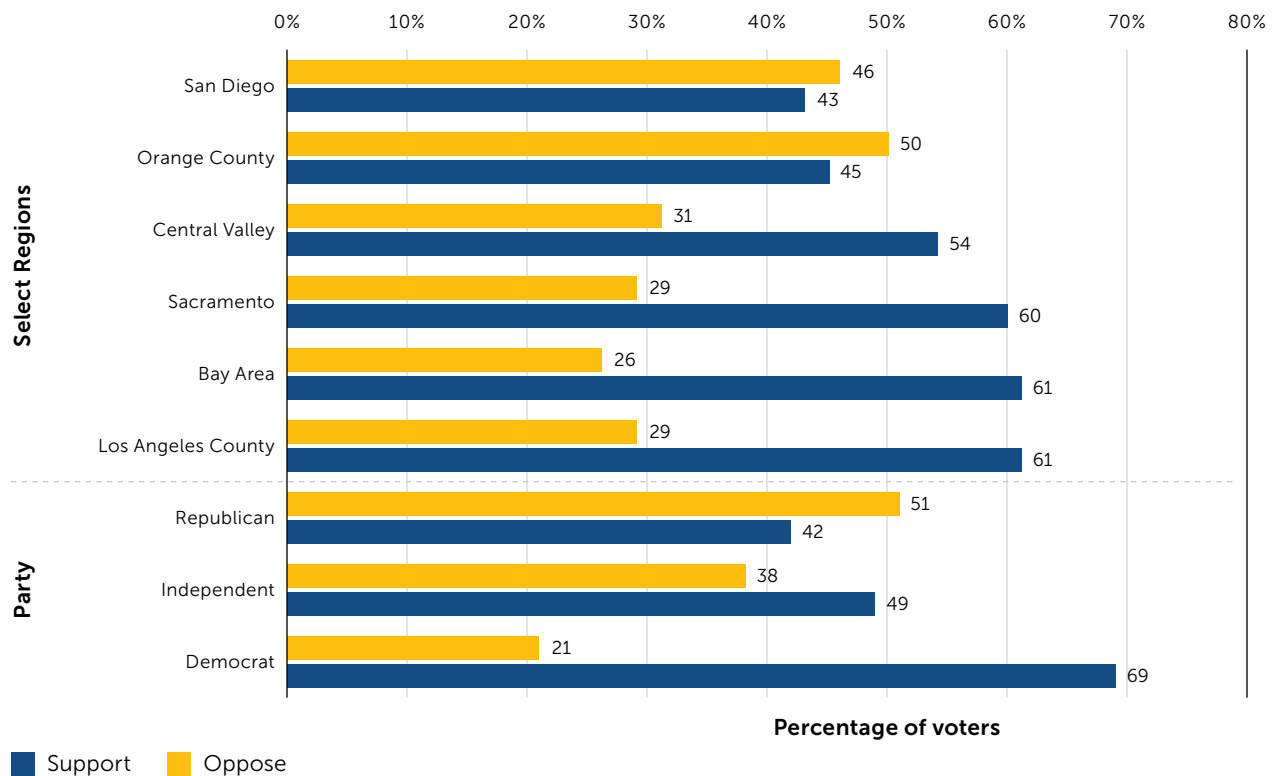
<sup>5</sup> This survey was fielded just before the teacher strike in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

## Finding 8: Voters Support Changes to Proposition 13

California Proposition 13 is widely recognized as having led to substantial reductions in California tax revenue and educational expenditures. Though some of those funds have been recouped due to Proposition 30, it appears increasingly likely that a Constitutional amendment introducing significant changes to Proposition 13 will be on the 2020 ballot. Under the proposal that voters will be asked to consider (the so-called “split-roll” proposal), property taxes for businesses would be re-assessed each year to reflect current property values instead of being based on the initial purchase price as they are now. Property taxes for homeowners would continue to be assessed on the purchase price. It has been estimated that this change could generate as much as \$11 billion in new revenue for state and local governments, including at least 40 percent dedicated to public schools. When presented with a description of this proposal, voters are supportive by a split of 55 percent to 33 percent.

Not surprisingly, there are some important political and regional differences on this question. Democrats favor the reform by a 69/21 split, while Republicans oppose it by a 42/51 split. Independents more narrowly support the proposal (49/38). Voters in Los Angeles, the Bay Area, Sacramento, and the Central Valley favor repeal, while voters in San Diego and Orange County oppose it narrowly (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9.** Support to Reform Proposition 13

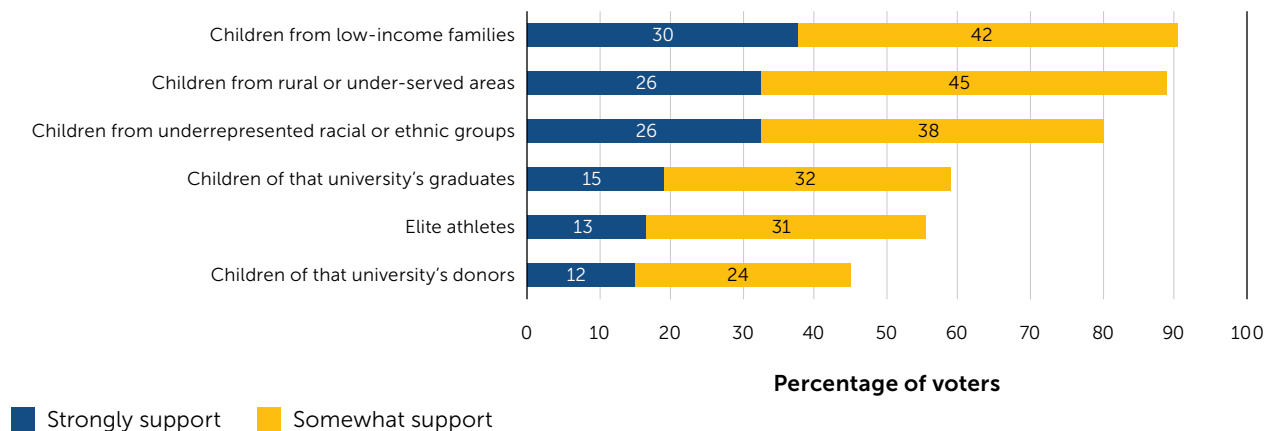


## Finding 9: Voters Support Affirmative Action but Have Mixed Feelings About Current Court Cases

Proposition 209 bans affirmative action in California public universities, but a case in front of the U.S. Supreme Court could restrict its use even beyond California’s current ban. California voters express ambivalence about affirmative action, though they appear to support certain kinds of admissions priorities. When directly asked about the Supreme Court case and whether Harvard University should be allowed to use race in admissions, 47–51 percent of respondents indicate neither race nor socioeconomic status should factor in Harvard’s decisions, versus 37–41 percent who say that race or socioeconomic status should be a factor.

In contrast, when asked about universities in general and presented with a list of different groups that might get admissions preferences, Californians express much more support for these preferences. For instance, 72 percent of voters say children from low-income families should have admissions preferences versus 22 percent who say they should not. Large majorities also support admissions preferences for students from rural/underserved areas (71 percent support, 22 percent oppose) and underrepresented racial/ethnic groups (64 percent support, 28 percent oppose). In contrast, voters are ambivalent about admissions preferences for children of alumni (46 percent support, 44 percent oppose) and elite athletes (44 percent support, 47 percent oppose), and they oppose admissions preferences for children of donors (36 percent support, 54 percent oppose). Overall, these results suggest mixed views about admissions preferences of various kinds, but they also suggest that several widely used admissions preferences (e.g., for alumni, athletes, and children of donors) are far less popular than those for students from various underserved populations (see Figure 10).

**Figure 10.** Support for Preferential College Admissions for Students in Different Groups



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## Conclusion

The results of the 2019 PACE/USC Rossier Poll offer a trove of findings that can inform the Governor and Legislature moving forward. They suggest some cause for optimism about current reforms (LCFF/LCAP and the Dashboard), while highlighting concerns about participation in and awareness of these policies. They offer potentially optimistic views of voters', and especially parents', ratings of California schools, but they also highlight that many are still dissatisfied. They suggest that voters are more interested in improving K–12 and higher education (especially affordability) than they are in expanding early learning opportunities, which suggests that the Governor and Legislature may need to do a better job selling the importance of that investment. Finally, they highlight that voters are especially concerned about gun violence in schools, which represents a clarion call to public officials to take an aggressive tack on solving this problem. If California schools are going to continue to improve—and by a number of metrics they have improved significantly over the past several years—policymakers will need to continue to devise policies that will support improvement, rather than get in its way.

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## Appendix: Methodology for PACE/USC Rossier School of Education Survey

- Tulchin Research surveyed 2,000 registered California voters online.
- Voters used a variety of preferred internet-connected devices, including desktops, laptops, tablets and smartphones, to complete the survey. In the case of each device, the layout of question presentation was altered slightly to accommodate screen real estate.
- Tulchin Research controlled and weighted the data based on party, age, ethnicity, gender and geography to obtain percentages for these demographics that matched the population of registered California voters.
- The survey was completed in English.
- The survey was administered from January 3rd to 9th, 2019.
- Tulchin Research used an online panel provider to obtain our sample. Panelists were recruited from a reputable panel provider and invited to complete surveys typically by email notification in exchange for minimal monetary compensation (i.e., \$0.50-\$0.75), in the form of redeemable points. The panel provider ensures panelist identity and that IP addresses are legitimate from people wishing to become panelists. Also, panelists are screened for completing a large number of surveys and showing undesirable behavior such as inconsistent responding or “speeding” through surveys.
- The margin of error for the entire survey is estimated to be +/- 2.19 percent at a 95th percent confidence interval.
- Some questions in the poll were administered to roughly equal halves of the samples, (i.e., split samples, which produce larger margins of error).



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## Author Biographies

**Morgan S. Polikoff** is an Associate Professor of Education at the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California. His areas of expertise include K–12 education policy, state and Common Core standards, curriculum and assessment policy, alignment, and the measurement of classroom instruction. Dr. Polikoff uses quantitative methods to study the design, implementation, and effects of standards, assessment, and accountability policies. Recent work has investigated teachers' instructional responses to content standards and critiqued the design of school and teacher accountability systems. Ongoing work focuses on the implementation of Common Core standards and the influence of curriculum materials and assessments on implementation. The 2017 AERA Early Career Award winner, he is a co-editor of *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* and on the editorial boards for *Educational Researcher* and *AERA Open*. His research is currently supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the Institute of Education Sciences, among other sources. Polikoff received his doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education in 2010 with a focus on Education Policy and his Bachelors in Mathematics and Secondary Education from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2006.

**Heather J. Hough** is the Executive Director of PACE. Prior to serving in this role, she led the partnership between PACE and the CORE Districts. Her recent work has focused on using research to strengthen state structures supporting continuous improvement and advance policies that support the whole child. Dr. Hough has worked in a variety of capacities to support policy and practice in education, including as an Improvement Advisor at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and a researcher at the Public Policy Institute of California, the Center for Education Policy Analysis at Stanford University, and the Center for Education Policy at SRI International. Dr. Hough holds a PhD in Education Policy and a BA in Public Policy from Stanford University.

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**Julie A. Marsh**, PhD, is a Professor of Education Policy at the Rossier School of Education at the University of Southern California and faculty co-director of the USC Rossier Center on Education Policy, Equity and Governance. Marsh specializes in research on K–12 policy and governance, blending perspectives in education, sociology, and political science. Her work has focused on accountability and instructional policy, with particular attention to the process and politics of adoption and implementation, and the ways in which policies shape practice in urban settings. One cross-cutting focus of this work relates to how teachers and administrators use data to inform their practice. A second major strand of her research examines educational governance and efforts to decentralize and democratize decision-making. Marsh is a co-editor of *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*. Prior to coming to USC in July 2010, she was at the RAND Corporation for eight years, where she last served as Senior Policy Researcher. She received a PhD in Education Administration and Policy Analysis from Stanford University, a Master’s in Public Policy from the University of California at Berkeley, and BA in American Studies from Stanford University.

**David Plank** is a Senior Fellow at Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). Previously, he was the Executive Director of PACE. Before joining PACE, David was Professor at Michigan State University, where he founded and directed the Education Policy Center. He was previously on the faculties at the University of Pittsburgh and at the University of Texas at Dallas, where he taught courses and conducted research in the areas of educational finance and policy. Plank is the author or editor of six books, including the AERA Handbook on Educational Policy Research. He has published widely in a number of different fields, including economics of education, history of education, and educational policy. His current interests include the role of the state in education, and the relationship between academic research and public policy. In addition to his work in the United States, Plank has extensive international experience. He has served as a consultant to international organizations including the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United States Agency for International Development, and the Ford Foundation, and also to governments in Africa and Latin America. He received his PhD from the University of Chicago in 1983.

## About

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) is an independent, non-partisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of Southern California, the University of California Davis, the University of California Los Angeles, and the University of California Berkeley. PACE seeks to define and sustain a long-term strategy for comprehensive policy reform and continuous improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system, from early childhood to postsecondary education and training. PACE bridges the gap between research and policy, working with scholars from California's leading universities and with state and local policymakers to increase the impact of academic research on educational policy in California.

Founded in 1983, PACE

- Publishes policy briefs, research reports, and working papers that address key policy issues in California's education system.
- Convenes seminars and briefings that make current research accessible to policy audiences throughout California.
- Provides expert testimony on educational issues to legislative committees and other policy audiences.
- Works with local school districts and professional associations on projects aimed at supporting policy innovation, data use, and rigorous evaluation.



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