

TO: The California Teachers Association
FROM: Geoff Garin
DATE: October 14, 2020
RE: Where Californians Stand on Reopening Schools

From September 18 to September 25, Hart Research Associates interviewed 1,296 registered voters in California about their views on whether, when, and how the state's public schools should be reopened for in-school instruction. The sample was constructed in a way that allows us to analyze the results among a representative cross section of all voters statewide, as well as among parents of public school students across the state.

Summary of Key Findings

1. The large majority of Californians say the spread of the coronavirus is still a serious problem in the state (79%) and in their own communities (63%). Indeed, more than half of voters (55%) say the worst is still ahead for the spread of the virus. Seventy-two percent (72%) of voters and 76% of parents worry a lot or some that a member of their immediate family might get sick with the coronavirus. A large majority of Californians (69%) say it will take until next year for the virus to be under enough control for the state to start getting back to normal.
2. California voters, including parents, believe that protecting the health of students and staff and their families should be the most important factor in deciding whether, how, and when local public schools reopen for in-school instruction (58% among all voters, 54% among parents). The next most frequently selected consideration is avoiding additional community spread of the coronavirus (21% among all voters 20% among parents). Both of these factors supersede other considerations, including the educational and social needs of students and allowing parents to return to work.

3. Sixty-three percent (63%) of all voters and 65% of parents approve of the current policy of only letting schools to reopen for in-school instruction if the coronavirus infection rate has reached a lower level in the local community. Among both parents and voters overall, four in 10 say that schools should not reopen for in-school instruction until there is a vaccine for the coronavirus. Large majorities would make an exception to the current reopening policy to allow for small group instruction of special needs students, even if a community has not met the requisite virus threshold. Opinions are divided about making exceptions for elementary schools.

4. While only 10% of parents say that schools should operate on a fully in-person basis, 40% say their schools should operate on a hybrid basis, with some in-person and some remote learning. The remaining half of parents say that, for the time being, their local public schools should operate only on a remote-learning basis. The results are very similar among the electorate at large. Only a minority of parents (38%) say they would feel comfortable sending their children back to school for in-school instruction. Large majorities of parents say they are very worried or somewhat worried that their children might get infected with the coronavirus (48% very worried, 31% somewhat worried), or that their children might carry the virus home from school and infect other family members (52% very worried, 27% somewhat worried). *By 69% to 24%, parents say they are more worried about their children being infected or infecting other family members than about their children falling behind academically if schools only offer remote learning.*

5. Public health officials—both Dr. Fauci and the California Department of Public Health—and local teachers are the most trusted by voters and parents to make good decisions about whether, how, and when schools should reopen. There is little trust for President Trump or Secretary of Education DeVos on these matters. Pluralities of voters and parents say that Governor Newsom and their local school district are moving at the right pace to reopen schools; in both cases, dissatisfaction with the pace of reopening is evenly

divided between those who say the pace is too slow and those who say the pace is too fast.

6. The vast majority of voters (85%) and parents (81%) say schools should only be allowed to reopen for in-school instruction if they have made major changes to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Indeed, large majorities of voters and parents identify a number of steps as so “essential” that there should not be in-person instruction without them. Specifically, over 60 percent see each of the following to be essential:

- Require daily deep cleaning and sanitizing of school facilities and school buses
- Require face masks be worn by students and staff at all times when they are indoors
- Make full-time remote learning available for students in high-risk medical categories
- Ensure ventilation systems operate properly to filter air and increase circulation of outdoor air
- Take steps to reduce class sizes to allow for six-feet physical distancing in classrooms, as well as in cafeterias, gyms, and other shared spaces
- Conduct daily health assessments of students and staff before they enter the school campus and increase coronavirus testing, with appropriate parental permission
- Allow teachers and other staff in high-risk medical categories to work from home
- Provide access to health services, including nurses and medically trained personnel, to monitor the health of students and staff and provide other health assistance
- Only allow in-school instruction if districts have a plan in place to conduct COVID-19 testing and contact tracing, include free testing for students and staff

Fully 88% of both voters and parents approve of the CTA’s firm stand that in-school instruction should only be permitted if school districts implement clear plans for conducting COVID-19 testing and contact tracing.

7. There is a broad recognition among voters and parents that local public schools need more money to deal with the impacts of the coronavirus. Only 19% of voters and 21% of parents say schools have enough money now to deal with the coronavirus. Among voters, 81% say schools need a lot more funding (39%) or somewhat more funding (42%) to deal with the impacts of coronavirus. The results are similar among parents (34% a lot more, 45% somewhat more).