

# FINDING UNITY & COMMON GROUND: WHAT OHIO PARENTS WANT FOR THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A report from Children's Defense Fund-Ohio based on a statewide survey conducted by  
Baldwin Wallace University Community Research Institute (BW CRI) in May 2022



children's  
defense fund  
ohio



Community  
Research Institute

Polls & Surveys | Data Analysis | Evaluation & Assessment

## Overview

We all want our children to thrive and flourish into successful adulthood. While there are many contributing factors, few would disagree that education is a core contributor to every child's success and opportunities to live well. As a community, we rely on our school districts and educators to provide quality education and equip youth with the skills and competencies that will support their success in the workplace, in higher education, in military service, and in community life. To ensure students are set up for future success and can come to school ready to learn, their basic needs must be met first.

Unfortunately, though, nearly one in six Ohio children live in poverty – that's over 430,000 children throughout the Buckeye State whose families struggle to access health care, nutrition, housing, transportation, and child care. This means many children in Ohio risk arriving to school without their basic needs met, making it harder for them to learn. In response to these challenges, many schools strive to address issues of "whole child" well-being by providing services to students and their families that go beyond academics to support their overall health and wellness. Today, schools throughout the state partner to provide on-site behavioral health services, feed children free schools meals during the school year and summer months, and build Family Resource Centers to connect families with needed assistance, among many other initiatives driven by the needs of their communities. Addressing these basic needs has numerous educational benefits: children miss fewer days of school, can better manage chronic health conditions, and come to school healthy and ready to learn. These partnerships between families, schools, and communities working together are the hallmark of a quality educational experience and an essential core principle of our state's Whole Child Framework.

However, debates in recent years in Ohio and across the country have grown heated and divisive in educational spaces. These debates have given rise to the appearance of widespread and vocal opposition – especially among parents with school-aged children – regarding what schools are teaching and how, including the use of whole child approaches in education.

### But what do Ohio parents and caregivers truly want for their children's education?

To answer this critical question, the Children's Defense Fund-Ohio (CDF-Ohio) and the Baldwin Wallace Community Research Institute (BW CRI) conducted a first-of-its-kind statewide survey of Ohio parents of school-age children to discover the true perception of whole child approaches to education.

The survey found robust support among parents for the state's "Whole Child Framework," which is aimed at meeting students' social-emotional, physical and safety needs, and ensuring children are prepared to learn. The broad parent support of free school nutrition services for all students, school-based mental health support, life skills and social-emotional learning is important because the comprehensive, "whole child" approach relies on strong school district, family, and community partnerships to meet the needs of all students.

## Ohio's Whole Child Framework

**places the whole child at the center, with district, school, family and community supporting the needs of the whole child using a comprehensive approach. A whole child approach broadens district and school focus beyond academics to include meeting students' physical and mental health, social-emotional, and safety needs.**

**The findings of this statewide survey of Ohio parents makes it clear: It doesn't matter where they live, how much money they make, their race, religion, political affiliation, gender, education, or age – Ohio parents and caregivers overwhelmingly support whole child education approaches, want equity to be prioritized in schools, and trust their children's educators to be partners in their children's success.**

In sum, there is unity and common ground. These findings reflect that parents across all demographics throughout Ohio overwhelmingly want continued prioritization of the whole child in schools. Beyond academics, this framework helps ensure a student is ready to learn by supporting mental health needs, good nutrition, and social-emotional learning skills.

While there were some small differences in support by party affiliation, geographic location, race, education, income, and other factors, no fewer than seven in 10 parents agreed with each of nearly 40 statements on the value of their children's education, including nutrition and mental health services, social-emotional learning, and equity. In many cases, support was at or above 90%.

**“**  
This comprehensive statewide survey captures the voice of Ohio parents, who broadly approve of the specific methods and strategies within the Whole Child Framework, regardless of their geographic region, how much money they make, race, religion, political affiliation, gender, education, or age. Bottom line, Ohio parents overwhelmingly support whole child approaches and trust educators.  
**”**  
- Tom Sutton, Director, Baldwin Wallace University  
Community Research Institute (BW CRI)

## Survey demographics



**are registered voters and the majority of respondents identified as Republican (34%), with 30% identifying as Independent and Democrat respectively.**

### **PURPOSE:**

To examine parents' attitudes towards Ohio's Whole Child Framework.

### **SURVEY DESIGN:**

CDF-Ohio staff worked with BW CRI researchers to design a survey instrument that accurately gauges the opinions of Ohio parents on SEL and other issues related to whole child approaches and supports. The survey consisted of 71 questions, including three optional open-ended questions, that fell into nine unique categories, including school nutrition, mental health, life skills, trust in teachers, and SEL, among others.

### **DATA COLLECTION:**

BW CRI partnered with SurveyUSA to interview 1,370 Ohio parents of K-12 students from May 9-28, 2022.



*For detailed survey methodology, survey responses, survey respondent demographics, and qualitative analysis, please download the Topline Report of these findings prepared by Baldwin Wallace University Community Research Institute at [www.cdfohio.org](http://www.cdfohio.org).*



## Key Observations

The survey results demonstrated that Ohio parents of K-12 students are in broad agreement with most ideals for social-emotional learning and educational equity in schools. Key findings include the following:



Ohio parents **support free school meals for all students** – making sure that all children have the nutrition they need to be healthy and learn.



Ohio parents **support mental health priorities** in schools and want increased funding to support more on-site, school-based services for students.



Ohio parents **support the Whole Child Framework** and approaches that support the whole child in schools and prioritize equity in education.



Ohio parents **trust their child's classroom teachers** to teach age-appropriate content and be good role models.



Ohio parents **support the teaching of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)** in schools to set their children up for future success.

## Key Results by the Numbers

### SCHOOL NUTRITION NEEDS

Most parents recognize the value of ensuring students do not go hungry. The survey included four items related to **nutrition in schools**.

- **64%** of Ohio parents said their child ate a lunch their school provided at no cost at least once in the past week, with a near majority (46%) reporting their child ate a school-provided lunch all five days.
- **87% agreed** that schools should provide school meals at no cost to all students, regardless of the student's ability to pay.
- **93% agreed** that schools should offer a variety of breakfast and lunch menu options that address a student's dietary needs (e.g., dietary restrictions, medical, or cultural accommodations).
- **82% agreed** that school meals are helpful to their families.

“

I believe

**that school/home/community are all intricately interconnected in the education of a child. This includes academics, emotional health, working with others and finding one's place among others (contributions) as well as mental health. None of these can be successfully accomplished in a vacuum (exclusive of the other components).**

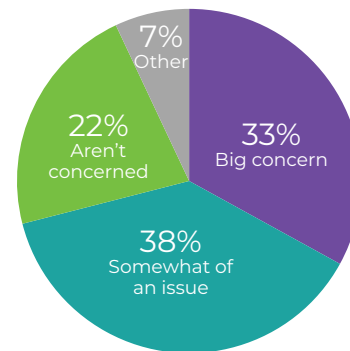
- Survey participant response to optional write-in question featured in BW CRI's Topline Report

”

## MENTAL HEALTH MATTERS

Parent responses addressing mental health include:

- **93% agreed** that their child's school should teach students how to live healthy lifestyles (e.g., smoking and drug abuse prevention, etc.). There was broad agreement across subsets.
- **84% agreed** that their child's school should teach students how to be aware or more aware of their own mental health.
- **83% agreed** that their child feels a sense of belonging in their school.
- **73% agreed** that their child's school needs more service providers available on-site to provide mental health services.
- **71% agreed** that more funding is needed to provide access to mental health services at their child's school. There was greater agreement among parents with a bachelor's degree or more and Democrats.



## BEYOND THE BASICS

There was agreement among parents that school districts and communities should join forces to support educational programs that go beyond basic academics and provide customized, relevant support for the whole student.

- **91% agreed** that preparing students for lifelong success is a community-wide effort.
- **90% agreed** that schools should focus beyond academics to also support the health and wellness of students.
- **90% agreed** schools should customize their teaching to accommodate for differences in students' abilities.
- **87% agreed** that schools should use evidence-based curriculum and instruction to educate students.
- **85% agreed** that schools should use curriculum and instructional materials relevant to the life experiences, cultures, and languages of their students.

“  
They [the schools] have them [my children] more than I do during the week, when their brains are crucially developing. They don't need to know math, science and history more than they need to understand how to function in society.  
”

- Survey participant response to optional write-in question featured in BW CRI's Topline Report

## TRUST IN TEACHERS

Parents across all demographics expressed confidence in their own ability to be a leader and partner in their child's education and reported high trust in their children's teachers to model and foster the life skills students need to succeed and thrive.



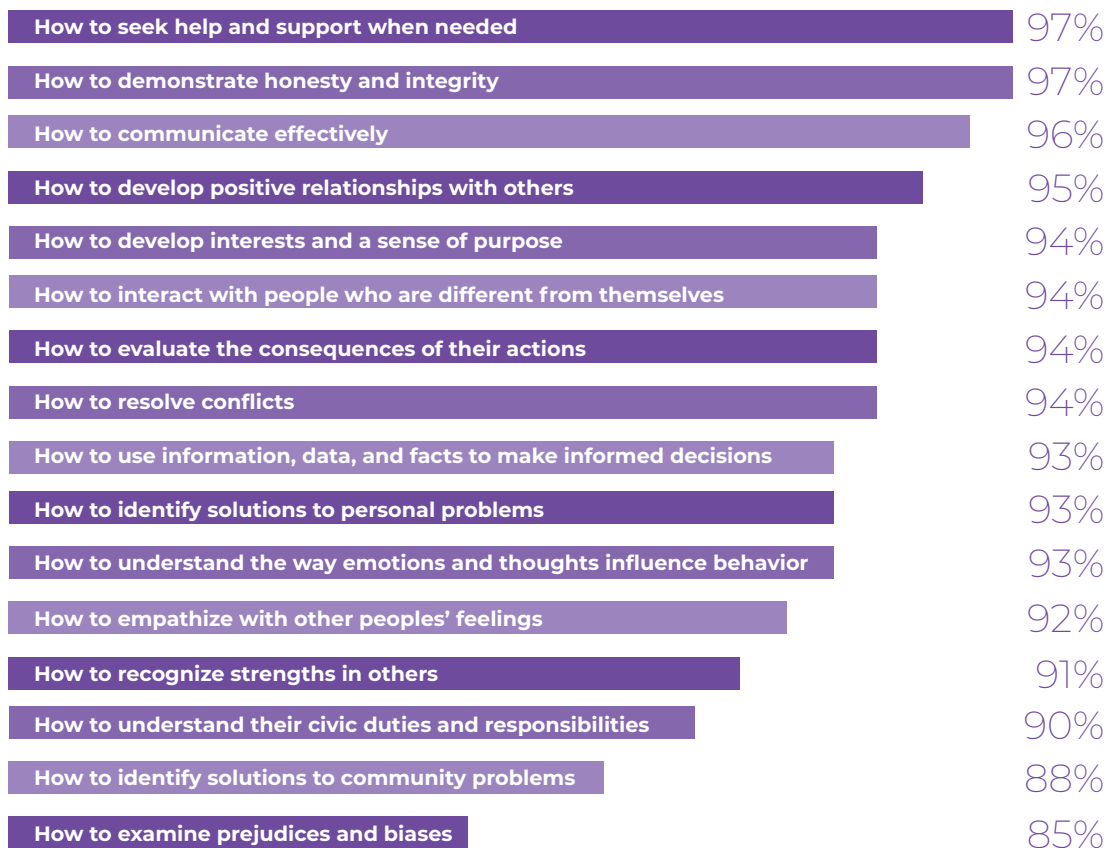
90% of parents agreed with this statement: “If I have a question about what my child(ren) is learning, I feel comfortable reaching out to their teacher.”



More than 90% of parents trust teachers to be positive role models and teach age-appropriate content.

## MUST-HAVE SKILLS TO TEACH

What skills do parents think schools should teach their children before they graduate from high school? Below is the combined percentage of respondents who “agreed somewhat” or “agreed strongly” with each statement. Results show widespread agreement by gender, age, educational attainment, race/ethnicity, household income, urbanicity (e.g., urban vs. suburban vs. rural communities), and party affiliation. Percent agreeing (somewhat or strongly) with each skill in descending order:



## TURNING TO EQUITY

There was also broad agreement about the importance of equity to ensure all students achieve success.

- **93% of parents agreed** that our society should do what is necessary to ensure equal opportunity to succeed.
- **92% of parents agreed** that our society should provide more support for some children based on need, so that all children can be successful in life.
- **90% said it is very important** that schools prioritize equity (in a question including a definition of equity in education).

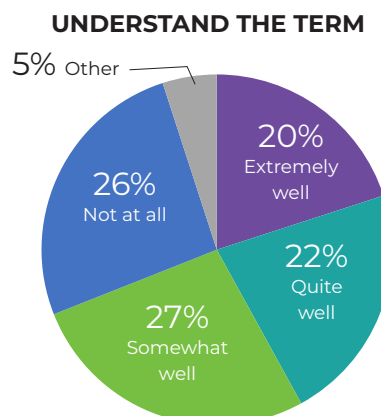
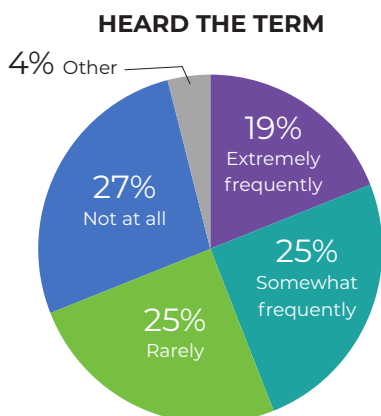
## ON SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

The report details that Ohio parents may not necessarily be familiar with or fully understand the term social-emotional learning (SEL). In fact, one in four parents say they have never heard the term before. However, nearly 70% of parents agree these skills should be taught in schools and have broad support for school programming that helps students develop skills in each of the five core SEL competencies, which are self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

- **68%** supported schools teaching their children SEL skills.
- **86%** said it is important that Ohio's voluntary state standards for social-emotional learning be available as a resource to school districts.
- **87%** of parents agreed that schools should provide age-appropriate sexual abuse prevention education (e.g. "good touch/bad touch," consent, dating violence, unhealthy relationships, etc.) to help students recognize signs of abuse.

## Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.



## Recommendations

No matter who we are – whether we are parents, school administrators, educators or counselors, business leaders, public officials, engaged community members, or faith leaders – we all have a role to play in the future well-being of our children and our communities.

1. **Be as explicit as possible when using the term Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) to raise awareness of the meaning and the accompanying benefits for children.** The research is clear: Social-emotional learning sets students up for future success by improving academic outcomes, equipping young people with the life skills they need in the workplace and their communities, and supporting overall health and wellness. While Ohio parents are in strong agreement about the importance of social-emotional skills for their children, lack of familiarity among parents, coupled with the politicization of the term social-emotional learning, may lead parents to oppose it even when it has value that is in their child's best interests. It's critical that those using the term social-emotional learning are explicit about its meaning, focusing on the skills that define it to raise awareness of what it is and the benefits it imparts for children.

**2. Prioritize whole child well-being in education with strong district, school, family, and community partnerships to support students' basic needs, learning opportunities, and overall well-being.**

Ohio's current strategic plan for education, *Each Child, Our Future*, and the Whole Child Framework, creates a vision for preK-12 education that "each child is challenged to discover and learn, prepared to pursue a fulfilling post-high school path and empowered to become a resilient, lifelong learner who contributes to society." Ohio parents want continued prioritization of whole child approaches in education that include strong district, school, community, and family partnerships, high-quality social-emotional learning programming in schools, and a core focus on equity-driven educational practices.

**3. Protect Ohio's K-12 Social and Emotional Learning Standards.** In 2019, the State Board of Education adopted evidence-based standards for SEL to provide every student equitable opportunity to learn and practice age-appropriate skills. These standards were a response to programming already happening in schools throughout Ohio and were developed over a 10-month period in a transparent stakeholder process to help each district consider their own local implementation, based on community needs and values. Nearly 90% of Ohio parents agree it is important that Ohio's voluntary state standards for social-emotional learning be available as a resource to school districts.