

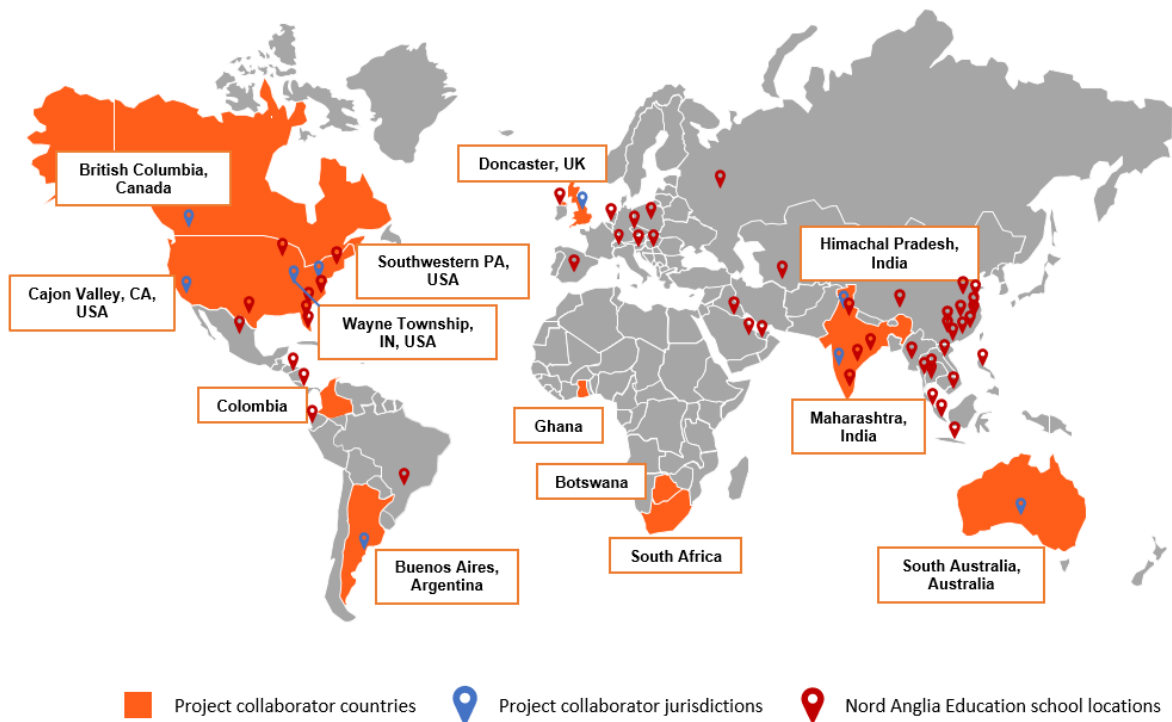
# PERSPECTIVES FROM PARENTS IN SOUTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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## **FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION NETWORK**

In January 2020, the Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings launched a new project focused on family and parent engagement in education.<sup>1</sup> The project emerged out of CUE's work on harnessing [education innovations](#) to address inequality and help all young people, regardless of the community in which they are born, develop the full breadth of competencies and skills they will need to thrive in work, life, and citizenship in the 21st century. In 2019, CUE conducted a consultation across 15 countries with 50 decisionmakers—from ministers of education to school leaders—that were focused on advancing teaching and learning strategies that supported whole child development, or as some call it, the development of academic plus 21st century skills. A recurring theme from the consultations was a desire of decisionmakers to have more and better strategies for engaging parents and families. Together with 41 project collaborators across 10 countries, members of CUE's [Family Engagement in Education Network](#), CUE has been exploring what it takes to build strong family-school partnerships, especially in contexts striving to address inequality and deliver a broad suite of skills and competencies for their children.

## **EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES**

The COVID-19 pandemic caused mandatory shutdowns and mass disruption of schooling worldwide. In the United States of America, over 50 million students enrolled in pre-kindergarten to grade 12 were affected. Educators responded to the crisis by rapidly shifting their in-class lessons online so that students could continue to learn remotely. As a result, parents<sup>2</sup> and families have been given a front row seat to how and what their children learn 'in school,' and academic outcomes and student success hinge on parent involvement now more than ever before. The coronavirus-related school closures propelled new and necessary ways of teaching and learning, but despite

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<sup>1</sup> The suggested citation for this report is: Winthrop, R., Ershadi, M., Alongi J., & Partington, S. (2021, March). *Family engagement in education network technical report: Perspectives from parents in Southwestern Pennsylvania*. Center for Universal Education at Brookings.

<sup>2</sup> We use the term parent throughout to denote a child's parent, guardian, or caregiver.

educator’s efforts, [statewide polls](#) show that 90 percent of parents are worried that their children are falling behind academically.

## SOUTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA AREA

### Demographics

Southwestern Pennsylvania is a region of approximately 5,280 square miles located in western Pennsylvania. In 2018, the Southwestern Pennsylvania area had a population of more than 2,324,740 residents (Census Reporter, n.d.).

Approximately 75% of our survey respondents indicated that their child’s school is located in one of the nine public districts listed in Table 1. Table 1 shows the demographics of these nine districts.

*Table 1. Demographics of Southwestern Pennsylvania Districts & Student Populations.*

District	n <sup>1</sup>	Number of Schools	2018-19 Enrollment	Race & Ethnicity					Special Services			
				% Asian	% Black	% Hispanic	% Multi-racial	% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	% White	% Low-Income Students <sup>2</sup>	% English Learners	
Aliquippa	40	2	1,010	* <sup>3</sup>	71	2.7	9.5	*	16.8	99.7	0.4	
Avonworth	118	4	1,799	2.4	2.2	1.6	3.5	*	90.2	12.1	0.6	
Brentwood Borough	227	4	1,226	6.1	5.5	3.5	2.8	*	81.3	45.5	6.6	
Fort Cherry	82	2	996	*	*	1.1	4.4	*	93.2	43.9	0.5	
Hopewell	88	5	2,109	0.8	4	2.1	4	*	89	28.9	0.5	
Keystone Oaks	109	5	1,908	6.9	4.5	4.2	6	*	78.4	30.9	3.4	
Northgate	74	4	1,073	2.6	13.4	2.9	11	1.2	68.9	53.5	2.9	
New Brighton	99	3	1,360	*	9.6	3	13.1	*	73.8	72.7	*	
New Castle	26	4	3,141	*	22.4	3.3	12.4	*	61.5	71.3	0.6	

*Note: Data from district websites: "Public School Enrollment Reports," (2019); "Public Schools Percent of Low-Income Reports," (2019) and "English Learners," (2019)*

## Schools

All districts shown in Table 1 serve students in Kindergarten through grade 12, with the exception of the New Castle Area School District, which serves students in Pre-Kindergarten through grade 12. Of the nine districts shown in Table 1, Avonworth schools have the highest proficiency scores in math and reading, with an average math proficiency score of 59% and an average reading proficiency score of 82%, compared to the statewide averages of 46% and 63%, respectively (“Avonworth School District,” n.d.).

## Family Engagement

### *Volunteer Opportunities*

Parents across several districts shown in Table 1 are encouraged to engage in their children’s education through volunteering in classroom activities and school events. For example, the Avonworth Middle School Parent Network is a volunteer group that works to sponsor activities for students, as well as support teachers through establishing parent liaisons and providing monetary funds for teaching resources (“AMS Parent Network,” n.d.).

### *Parent Portals*

All nine districts shown in Table 1 offer parents direct access to key school announcements and information, as well as to more personalized information, such as their child’s grades, through various forms of online Parent Portal platforms.

### *Positive Steps Wellness Center*

Both the Aliquippa School District and the New Brighton Area School District offer counseling services at their schools, in collaboration with Western Pennsylvania Psych Care. Services include individual therapy, family therapy, and group therapy. Counseling can be school, family, or self-referred. Sessions are provided for students during the school day (“For Parents & Students,” n.d.; “Positive Steps Wellness Center,” n.d.).

## Key Initiatives

### *Online Learning Services*

Several of the districts included in Table 1 offer online learning options for students. The Brentwood Cyber Academy, Keystone Oaks Cyber Academy, and Northgate Online Learning Academy provide students with K-12 online learning platforms, in which courses are taught and overseen by local, certified teachers (“Brentwood Cyber Academy,” n.d.; “Keystone Oaks Cyber Academy,” n.d.; “Online Learning Academy,” n.d.).

Through the New Brighton Lions Online Academy, eligible students can choose to enroll in a “blended” schedule which combines both traditional classroom and online courses on campus, a “hybrid” schedule which combines traditional classroom courses and online classes that take place off campus, or an exclusively “cyber” schedule in which all classes are virtual. These online learning services are designed to offer students flexible and innovative learning opportunities while still maintaining access to the services available in traditional school environments (“Mission and Vision of LOLA,” n.d.).

### *Remake Learning*

The Avonworth, Keystone Oaks, and New Castle Area school districts are members of Remake Learning, a network of people and organizations in the Southwestern Pennsylvania region dedicated to sharing best practices for 21<sup>st</sup> century teaching and learning (“Remake Learning Network Members,” n.d.). The Remake Learning mission statement reads: “Remake Learning is a network that ignites engaging, relevant, and equitable learning practices in support of young people navigating rapid social and technological change” (“About Remake Learning,” n.d.).

## **SURVEY OF PARENTS**

From June 29, 2020 to August 8, 2020, CUE distributed a 34-item online survey to parents and caregivers of students enrolled in the Southwestern Pennsylvania schools. A total of 1,674 primary caregivers responded to the survey. To collect data representative of the population in Southwestern Pennsylvania, we determined our sample sizes before commencing data collection by assuming that the student population in this jurisdiction was equal to the parent population, thus using a conservative approach, which dismissed the possibility of siblings. We set our confidence level at 95% and margin of error at 5%, according to guidelines for research activities (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Based on our prior calculations, we aimed to collect 384 responses from primary caregivers in Southwestern Pennsylvania. All survey items were optional such that respondents could choose to provide a response to a question without having responded to a previous question. As a result, the response proportions per survey item options do not always sum to 100%.

## **SURVEY AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST**

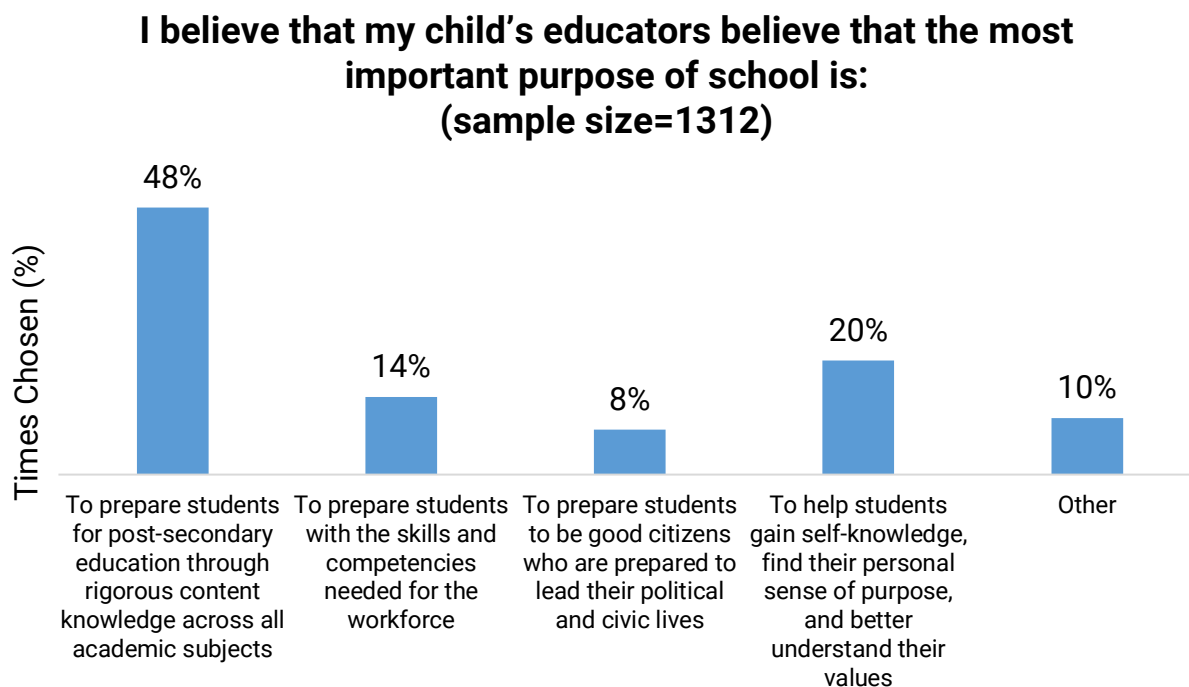
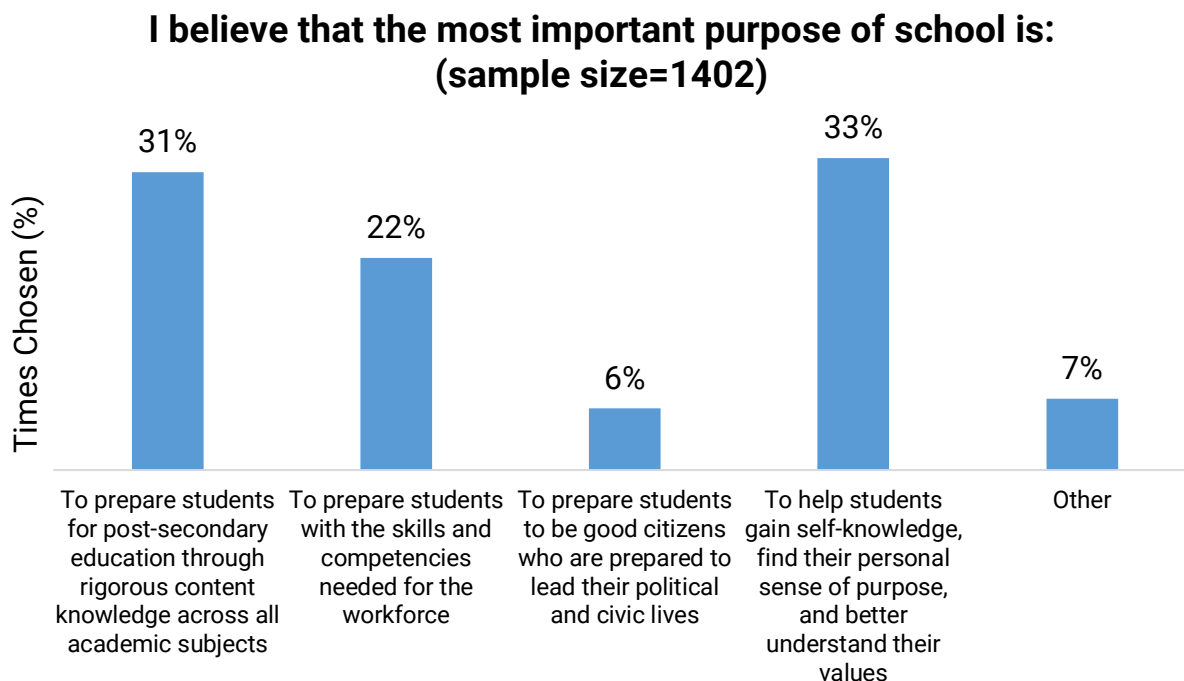
A selection of survey responses is presented below. The order in which the results are presented here does not reflect the order in which the respondents completed the questions on the survey. However, CUE will share the survey instrument upon request. Please send inquiries to: [leapfrogging@brookings.edu](mailto:leapfrogging@brookings.edu).

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank our project collaborators at The Grable Foundation and the districts of Aliquippa, Avonworth, Brentwood, Butler, Chartiers Valley, Duquesne, Fort Cherry, Hampton, Hopewell, Keystone, New Brighton, New Castle, Northgate, South Fayette, and Western Beaver, without whom we would not have been able to conduct this survey.

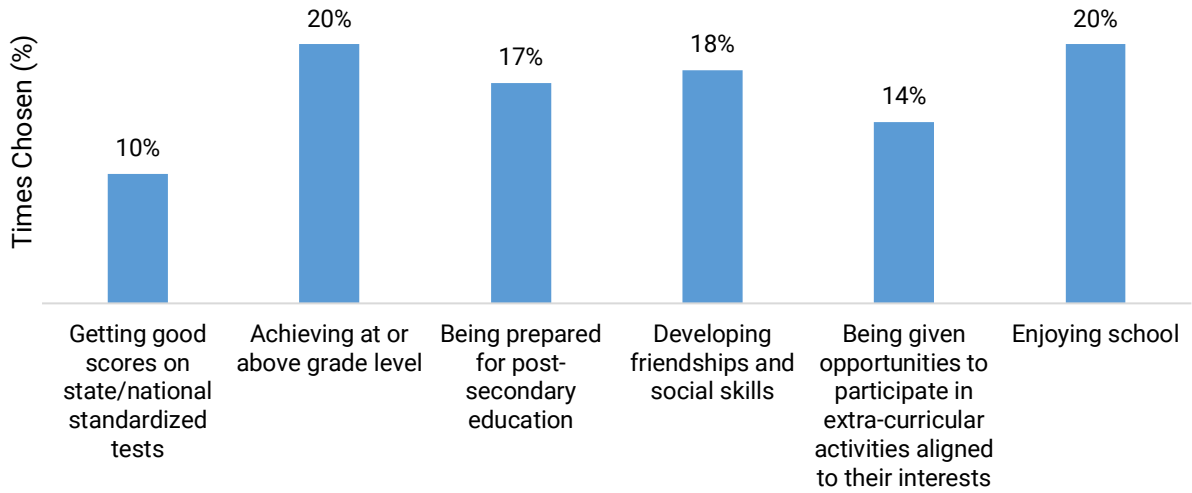
## SURVEY FINDINGS

### Parents' beliefs on the purpose of school and perceived alignment with teachers



## Parents' indicators of quality and perceived alignment with educators

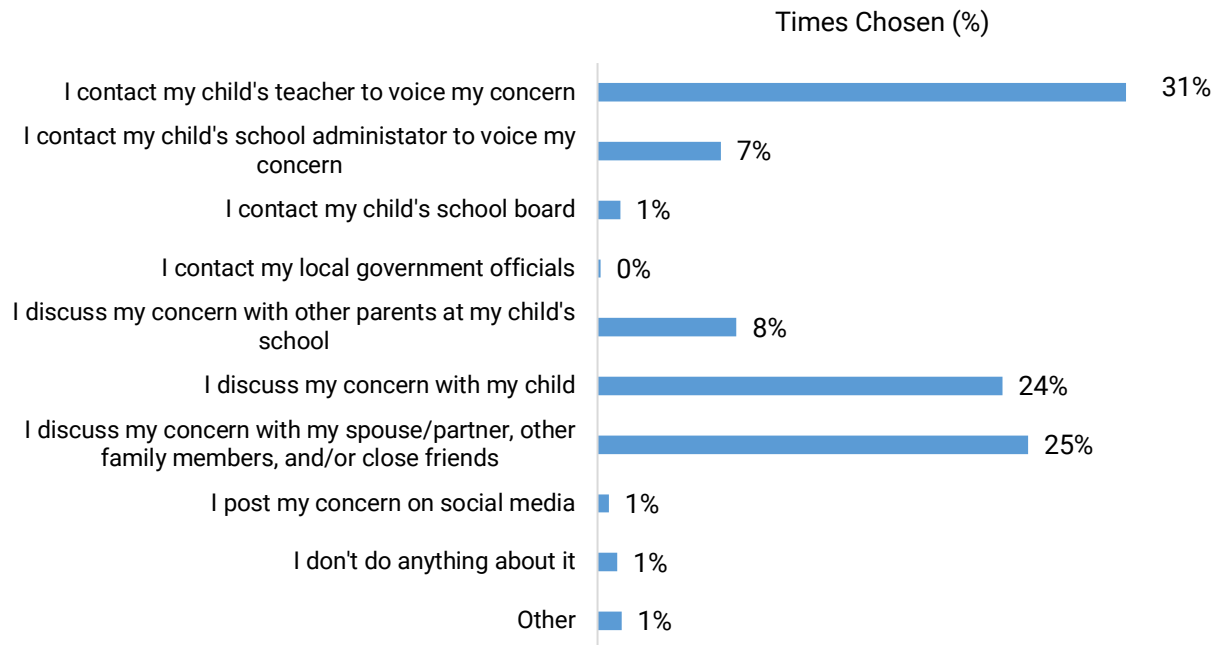
I am satisfied with my child's education when my child is:  
(sample size=1335)



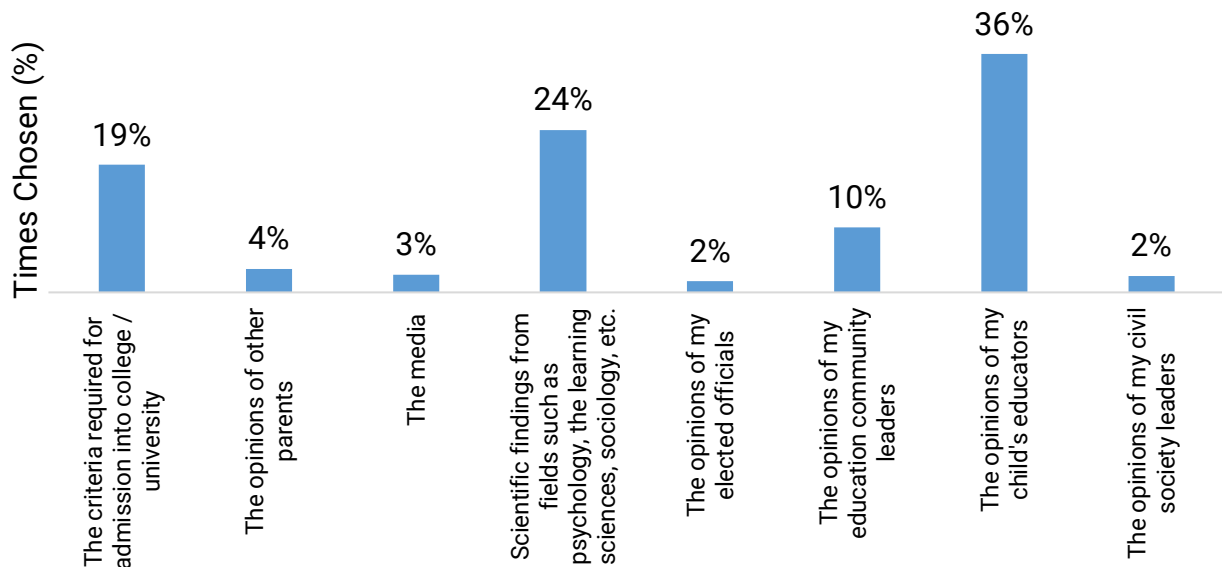


## Parents' sources of information

### How do you react when something about your child's education bothers or upsets you? (sample size=1247)

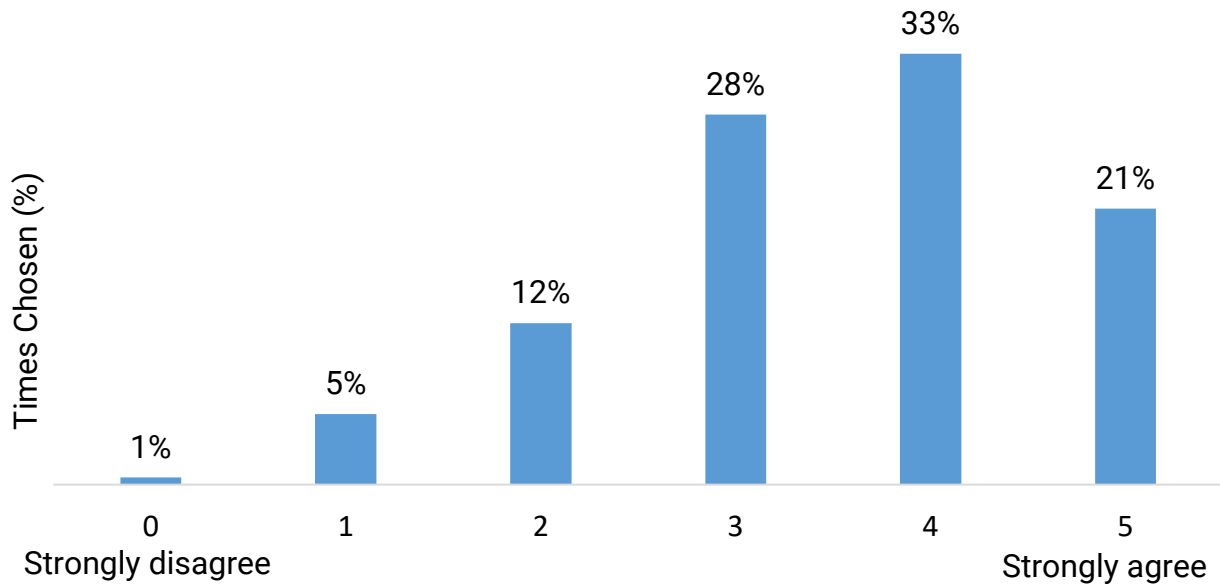


### What influences your perspective about what makes for a good quality education for your child? (sample size=1147)

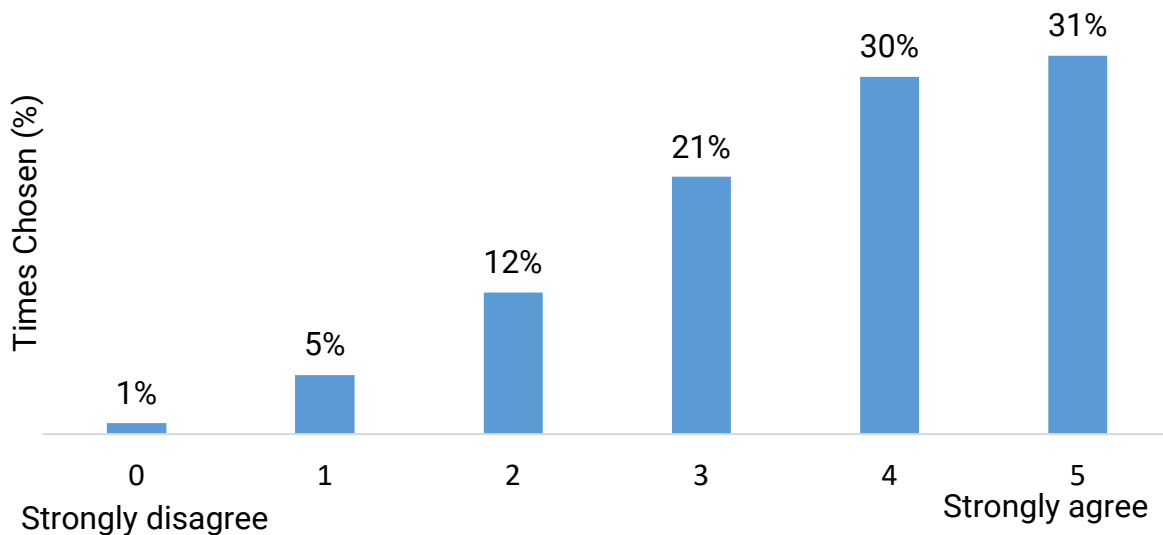


## Parents' trust of and perceived alignment with teachers

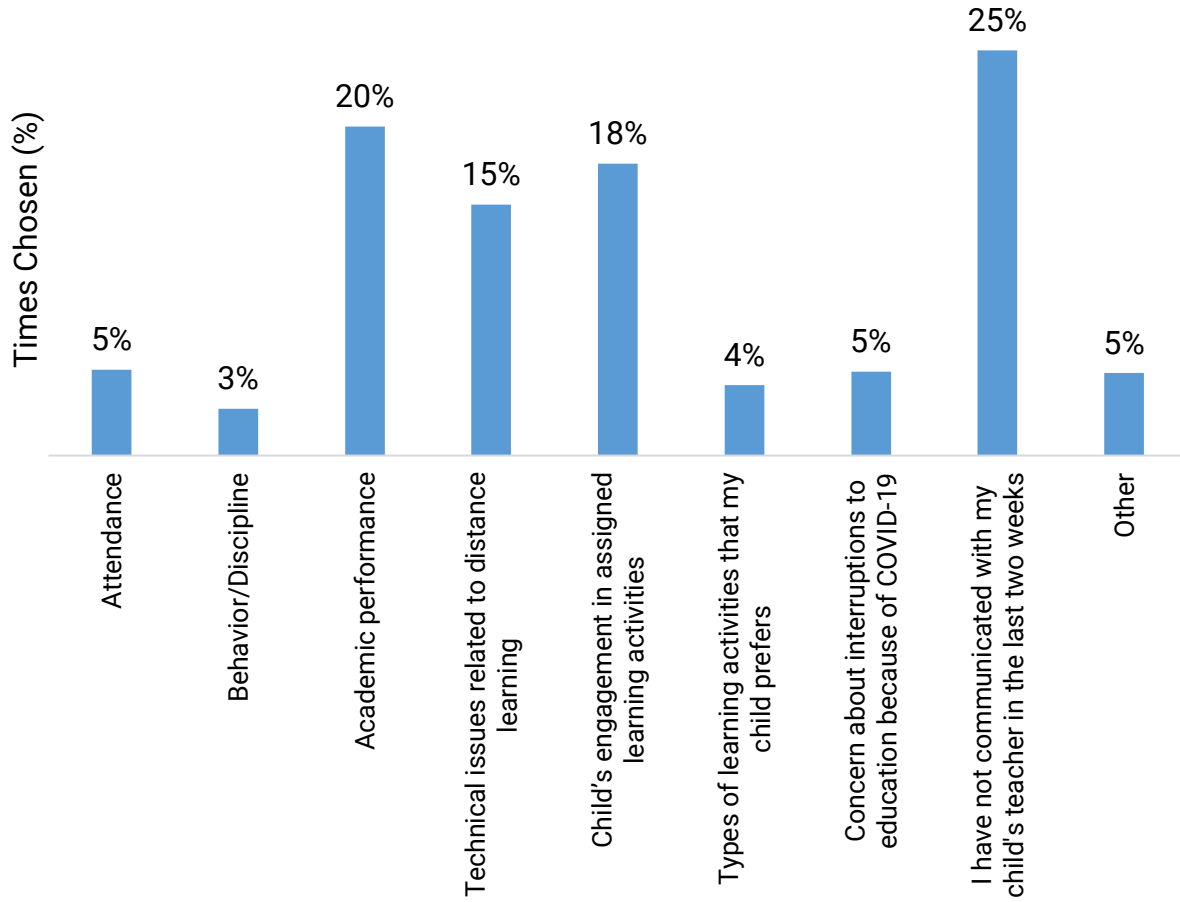
**My child's teachers share my beliefs about what makes a good education.  
(sample size=1231)**



**My child's teachers are receptive to my input and suggestions.  
(sample size=1241)**

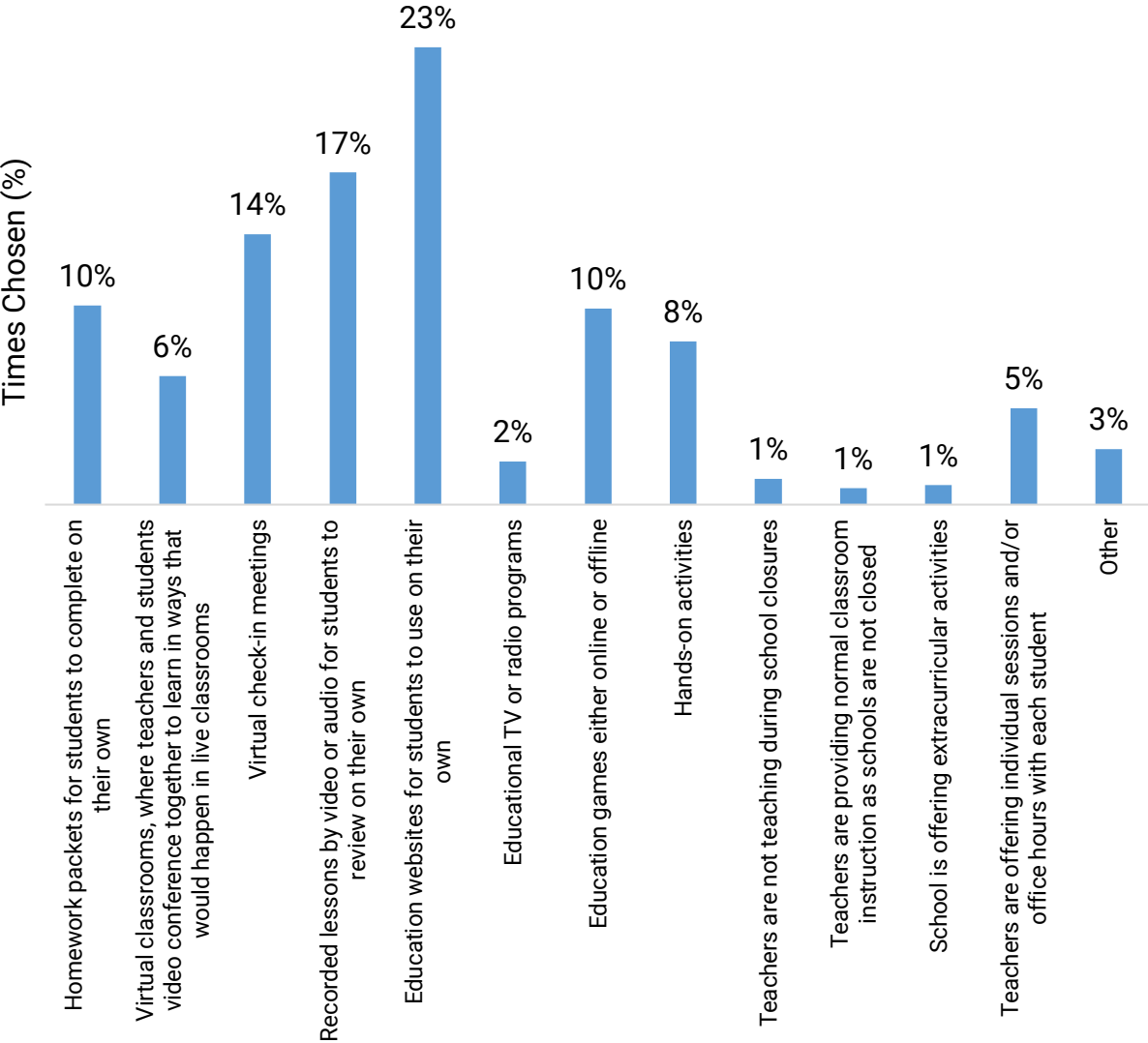


**In the last two weeks, what have you communicated to your child's teacher about:  
(sample size=1253)**

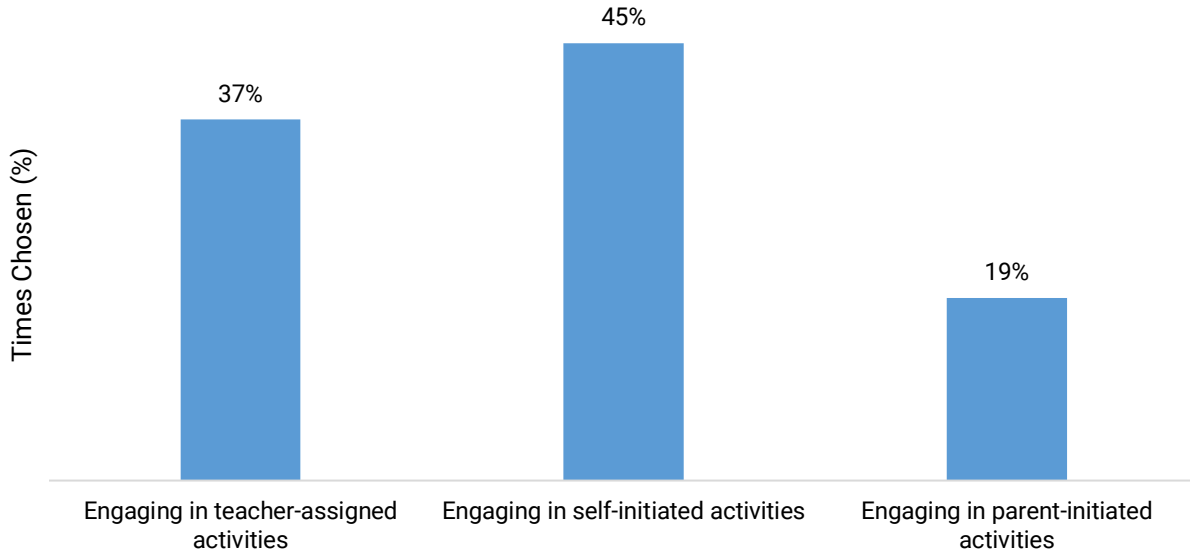


# Parents' opinions on pedagogy

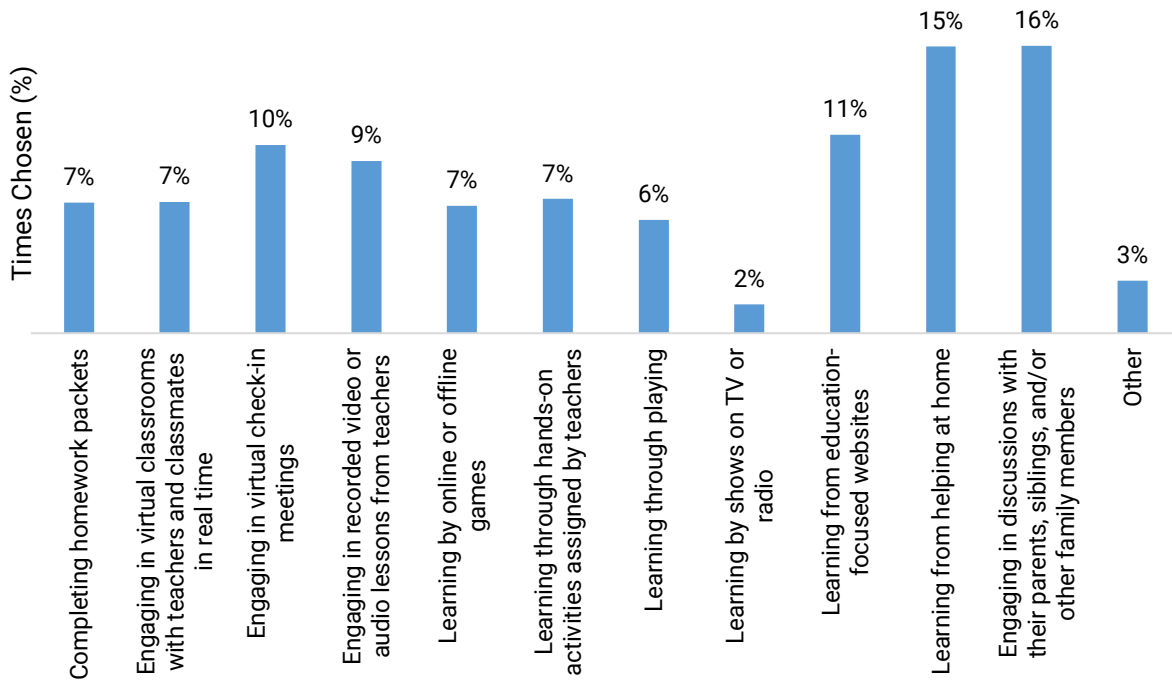
**How are your child's teachers continuing to teach right now?**  
(sample size=1529)



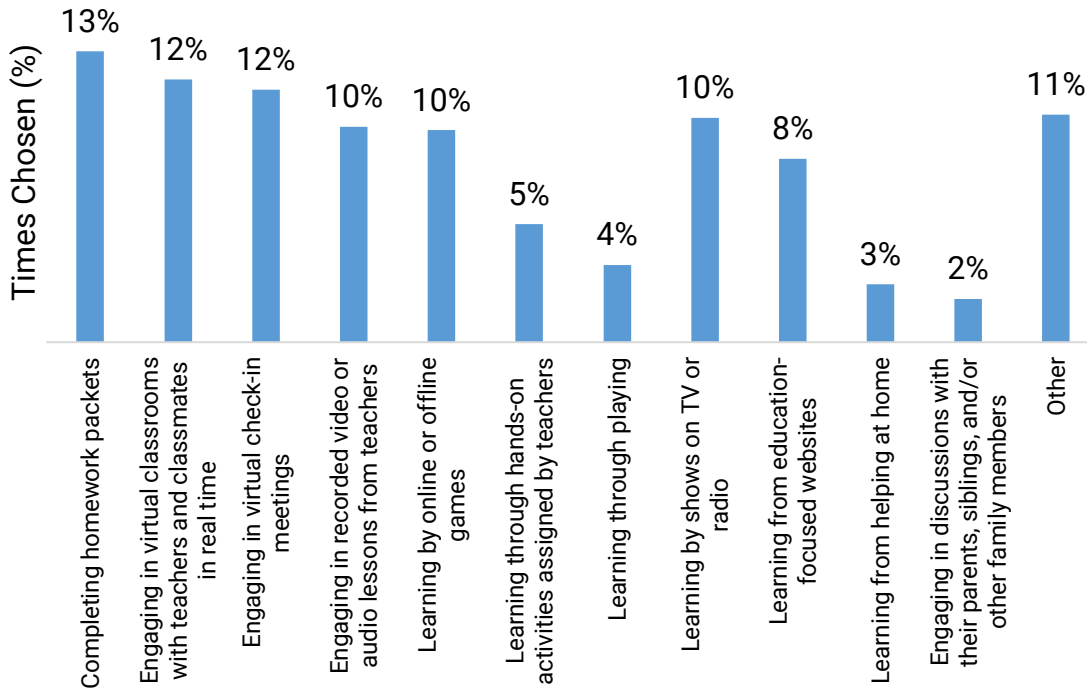
**How is your child spending the majority of their time right now?  
(sample size=1492)**



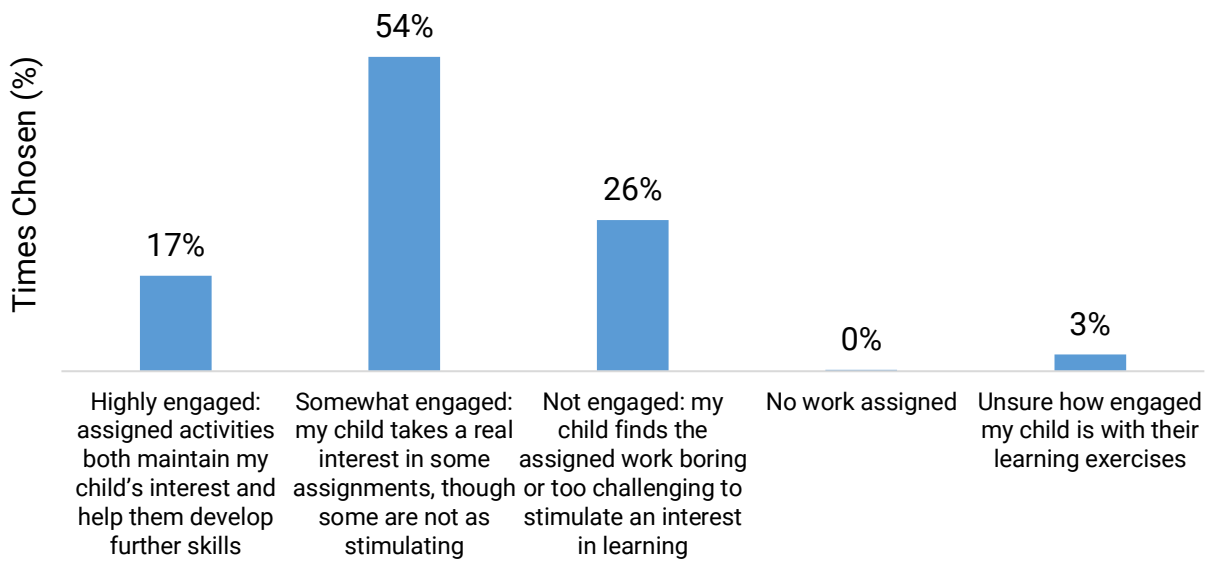
**When you think about the different ways in which your child is learning right now, which are you the MOST satisfied with.  
(sample size=1418)**



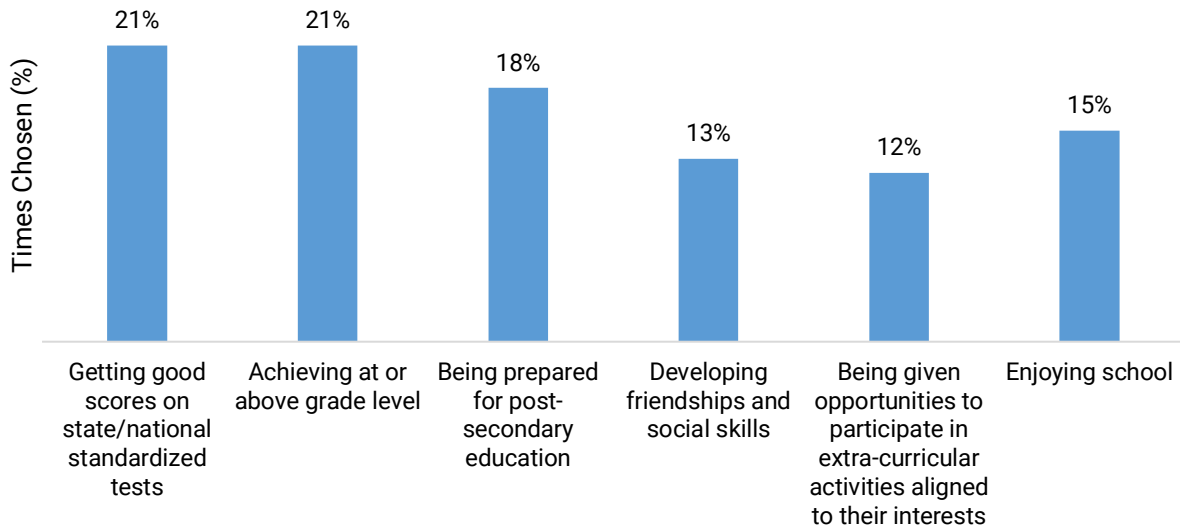
**When you think about the different ways in which your child is learning right now, which are you the LEAST satisfied with?  
(sample size=1257)**



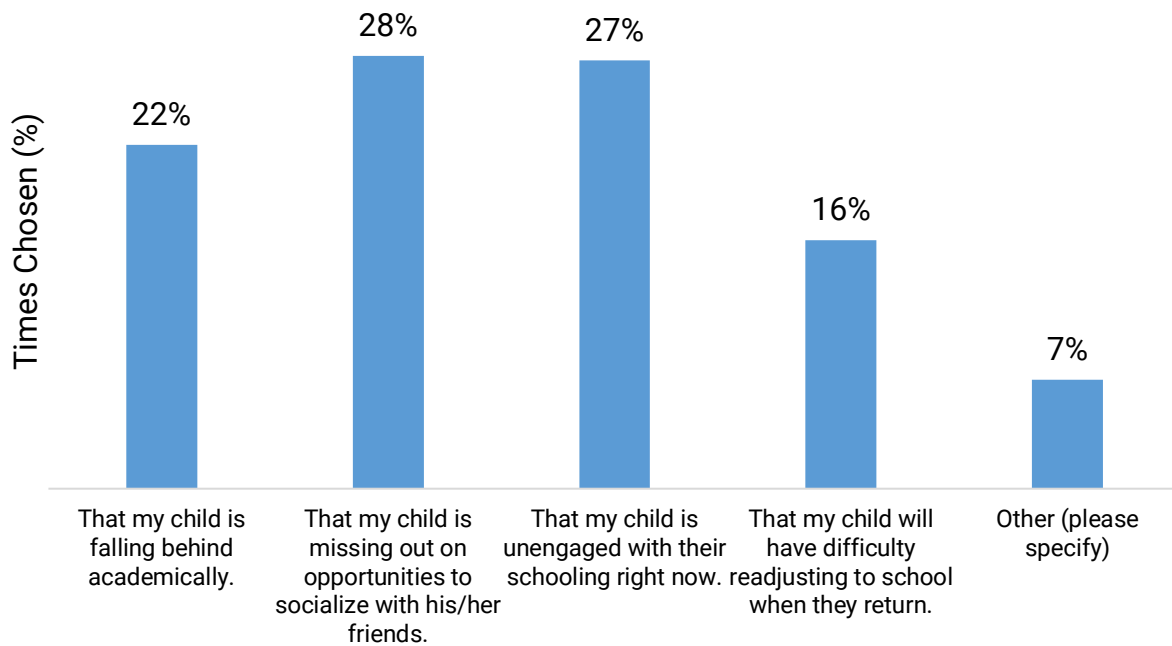
**How engaged is your child with the activities their teacher has assigned?  
(sample size=1253)**



**I believe that my child's educators are satisfied with their students' education when their students are:  
(sample size=1249)**

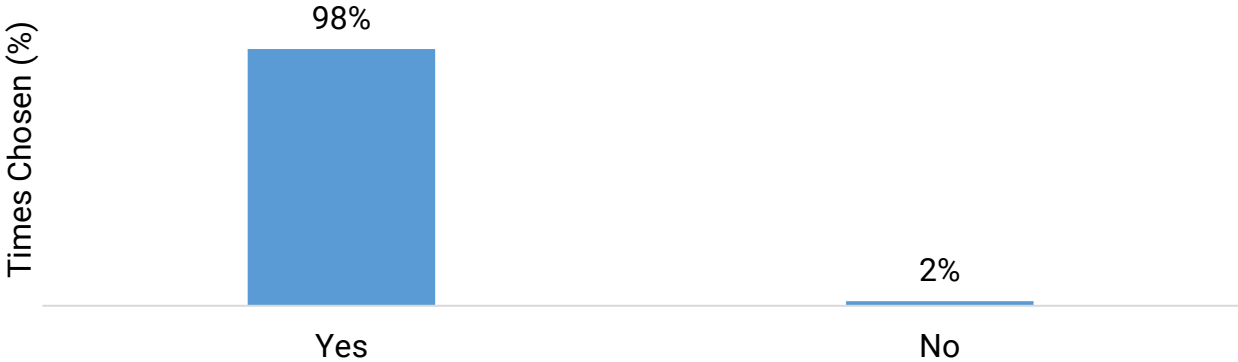


**With regards to your child's education right now, what worries you the MOST?  
(sample size=1263)**

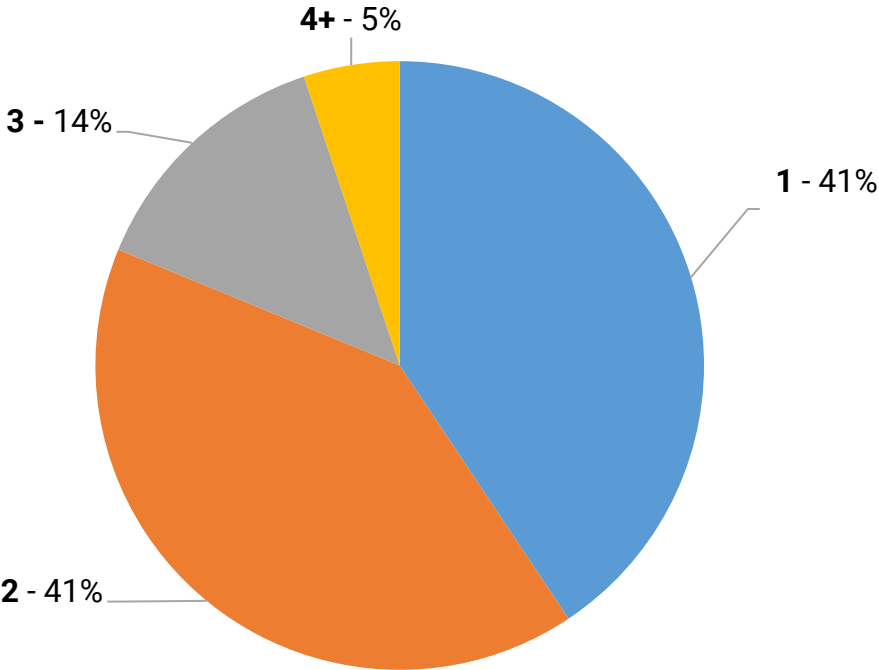


Demographics of survey respondents from Southwestern Pennsylvania

Are you your child's primary caregiver?  
(sample size=1174)

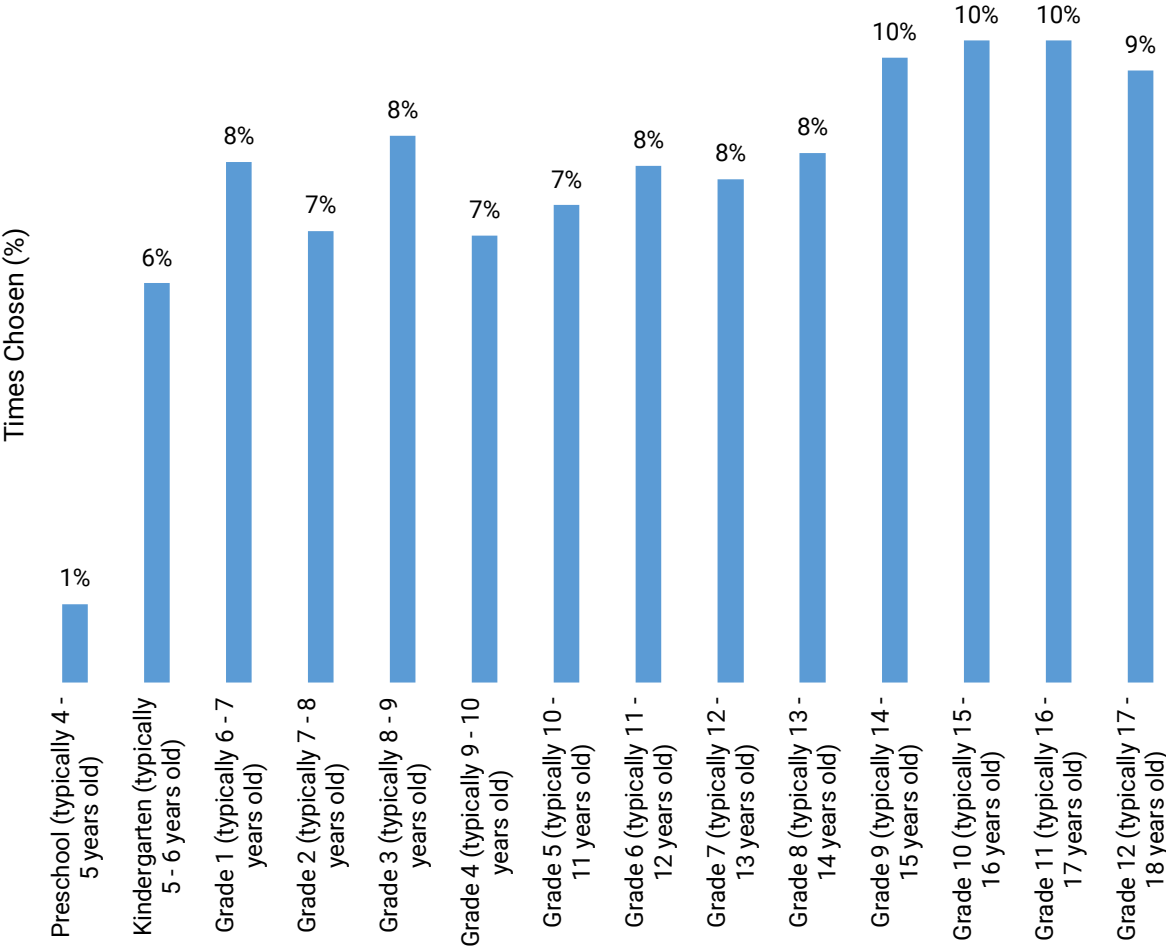


How many children do you have who are currently in preschool through grade 12 in school and live at home with you?  
(sample size=1629)

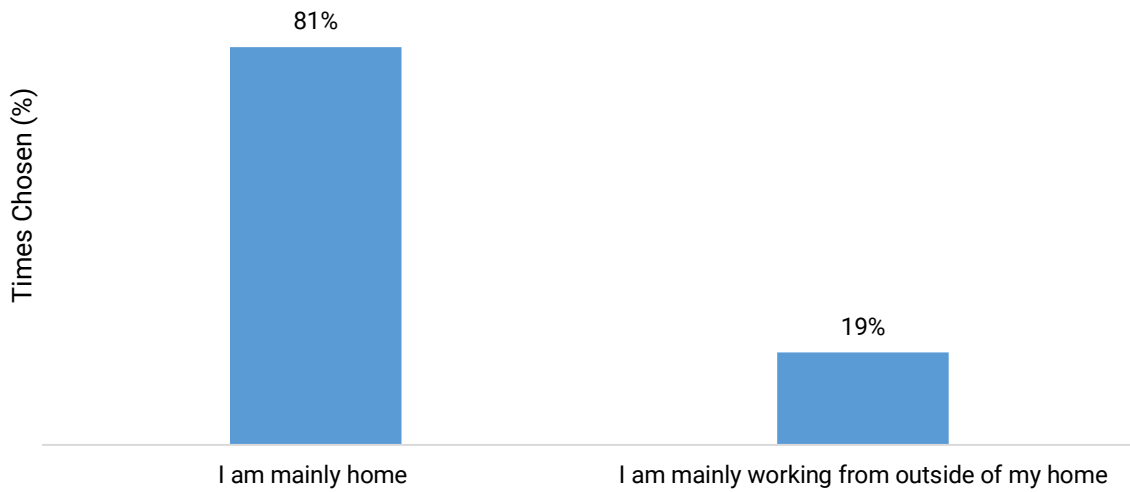




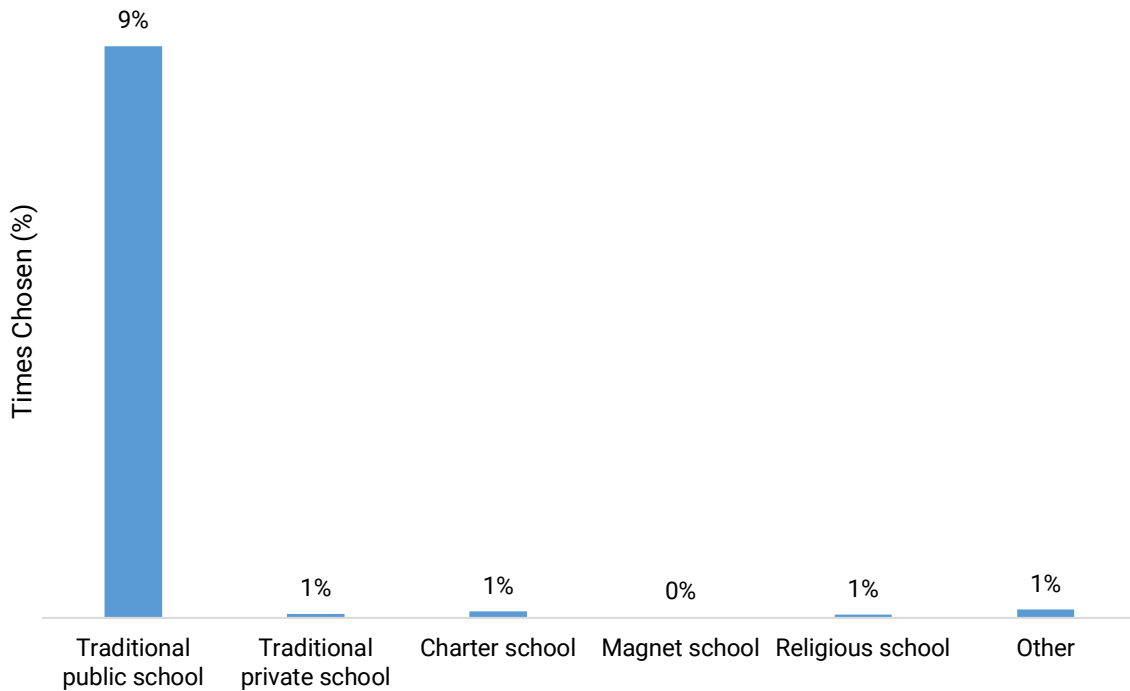
**In which grade is your oldest child who is enrolled in school (preschool to grade 12)?  
(sample size=1611)**



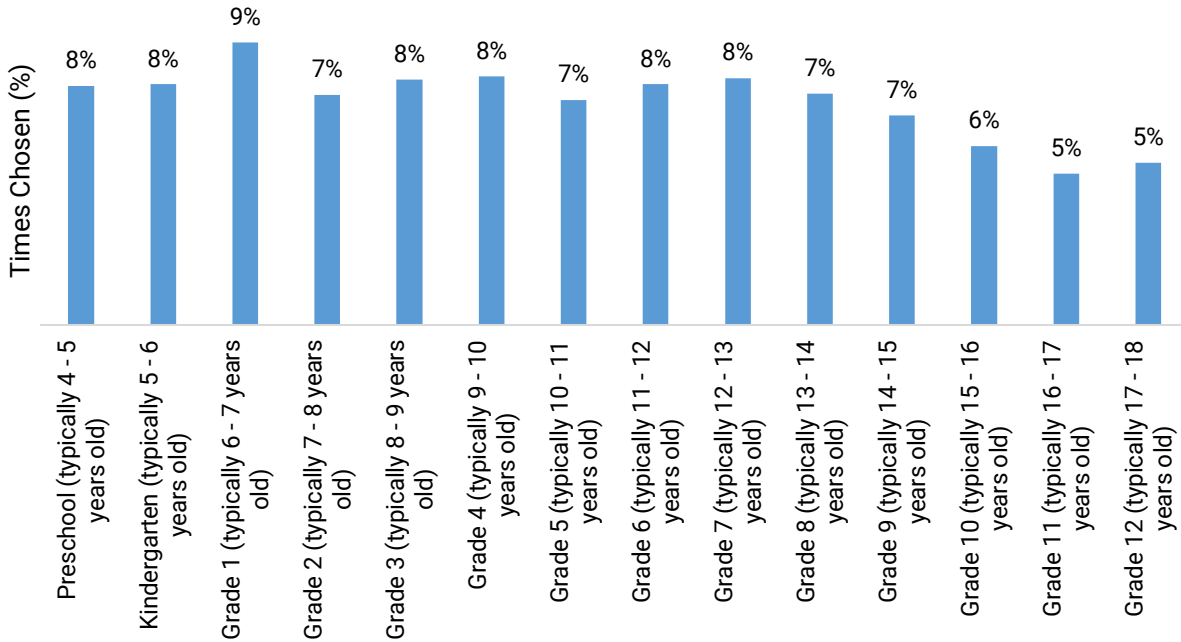
**During your child's school closure, are you mainly home (whether employed or unemployed) or are you mainly working from outside your home? (sample size=1181)**



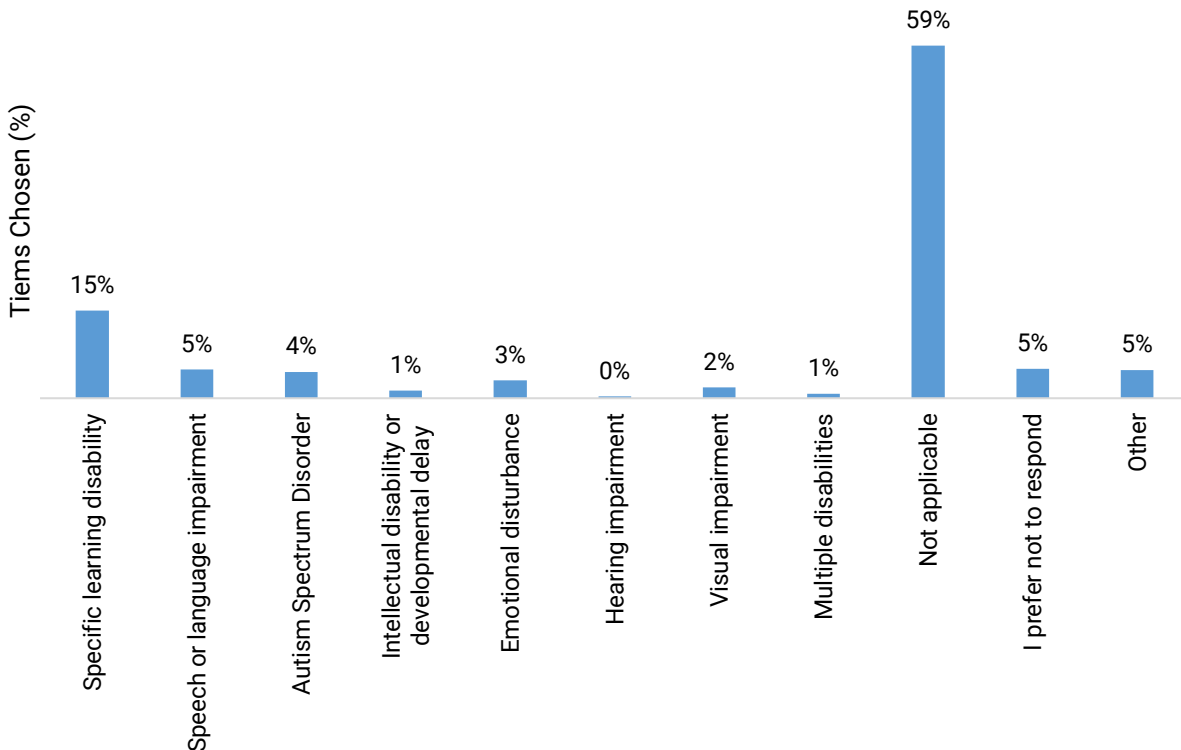
**In what type of school is your child enrolled? (sample size=1165)**



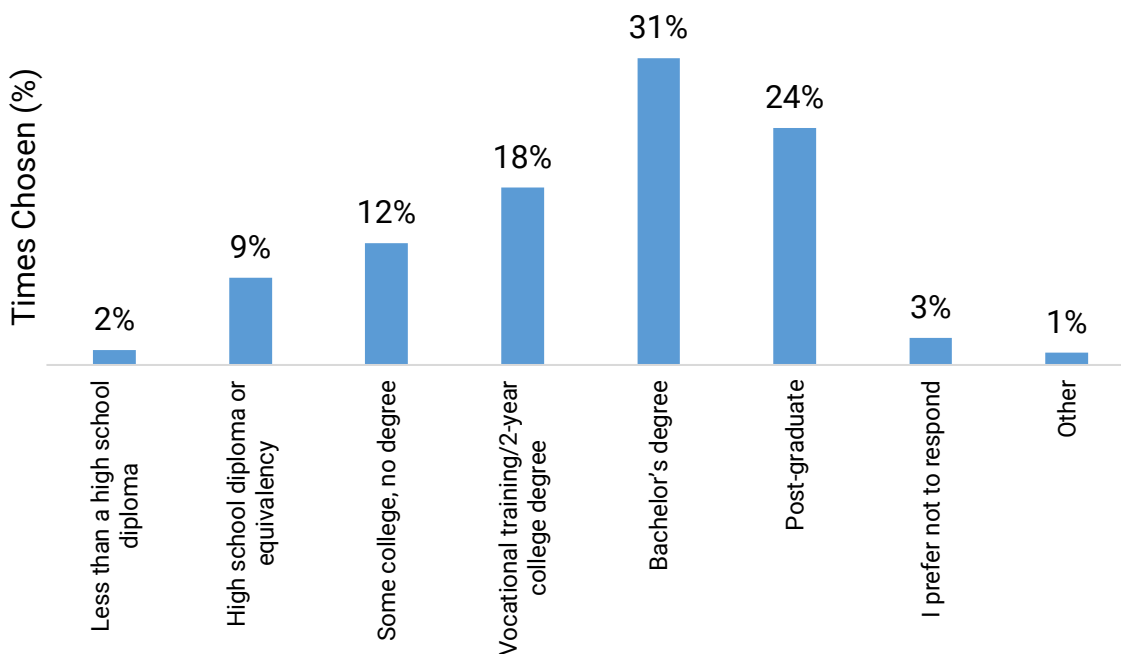
**In what grade(s) is/are all your school aged children? For this question, please consider all your children. (sample size=1167)**



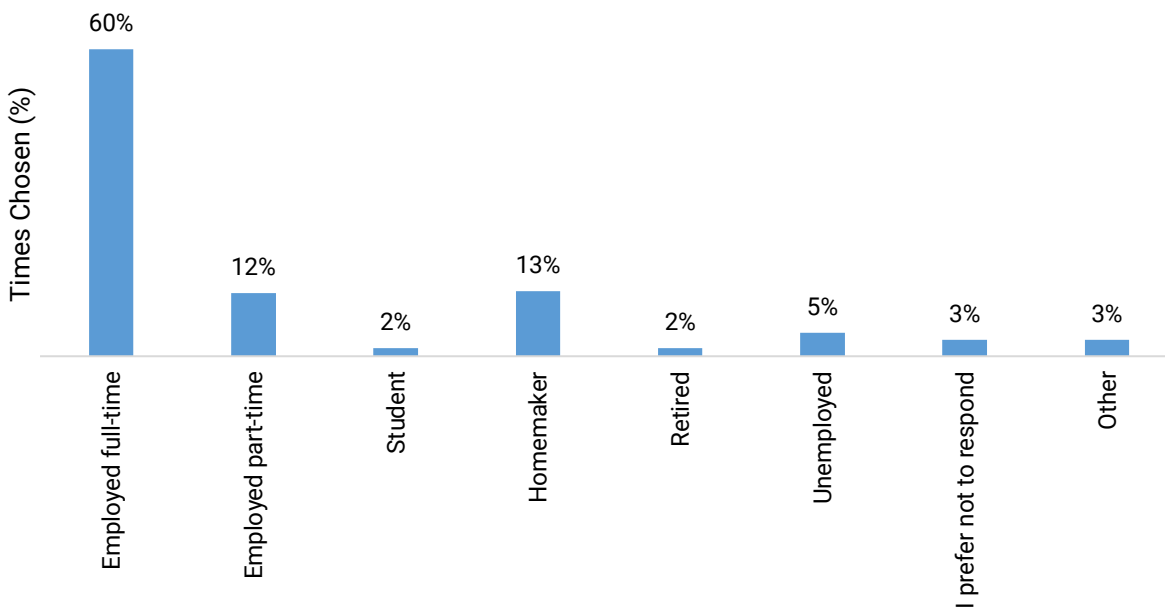
**Has your child been diagnosed with any of the following? (sample size=1011)**



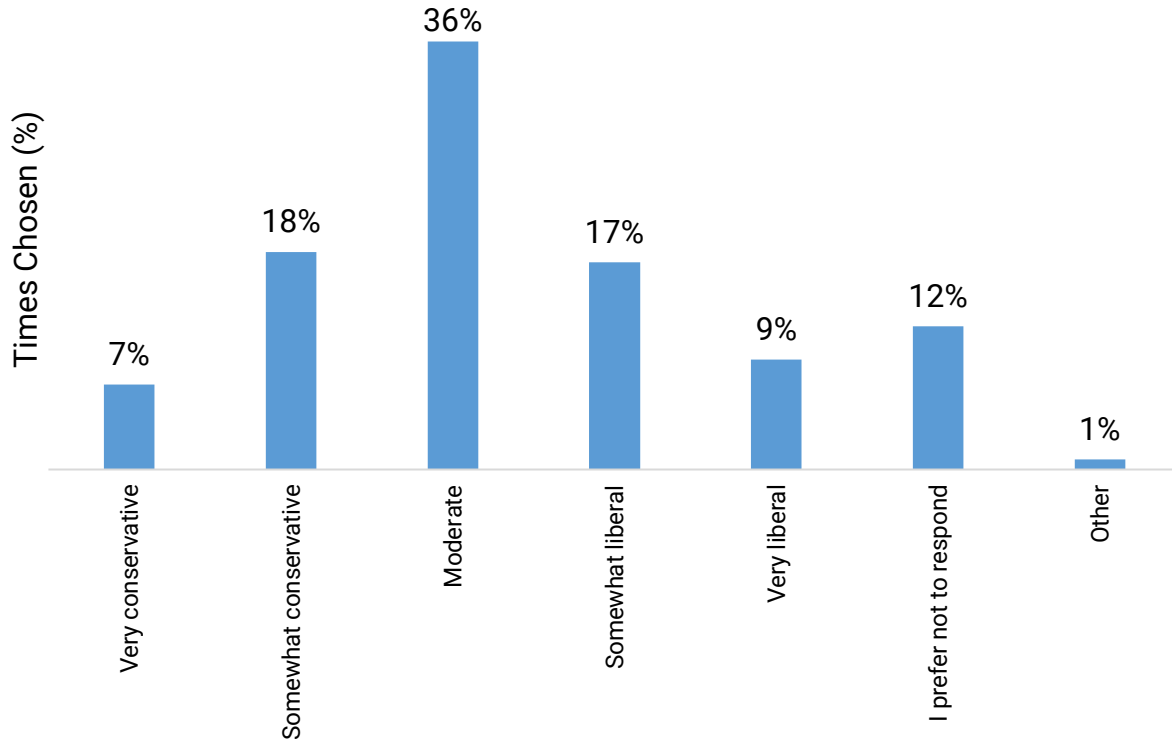
**What is your highest level of education attained?  
(sample size=1175)**



**What is your current employment status?  
(sample size=1177)**



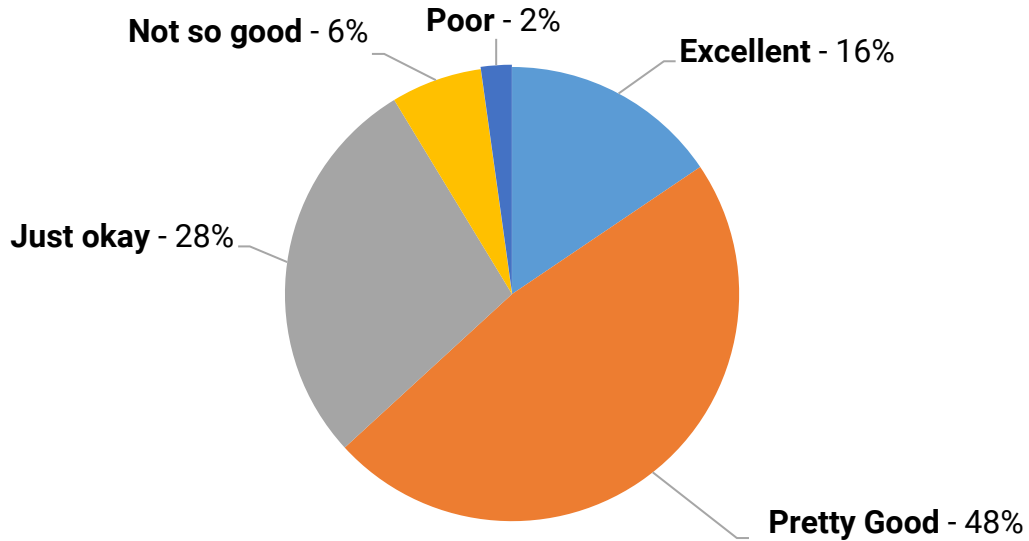
**When thinking about social issues, do you consider yourself to be:  
(sample size=1172)**



## Parents' satisfaction with their children's education

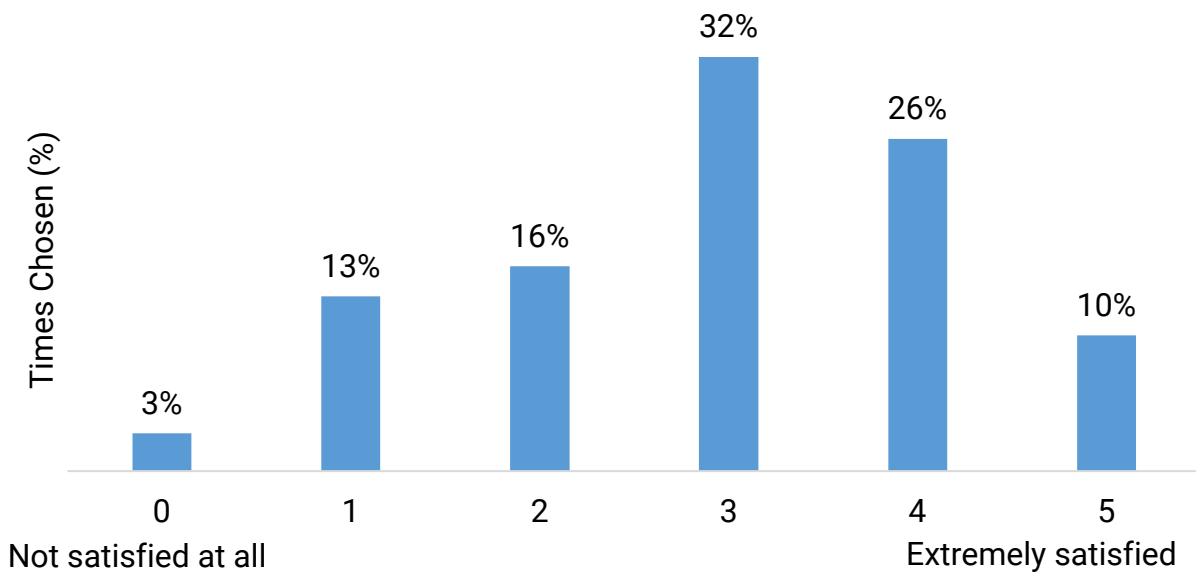
How would you rate the education that your child is getting from their school right now?

(sample size=1589)

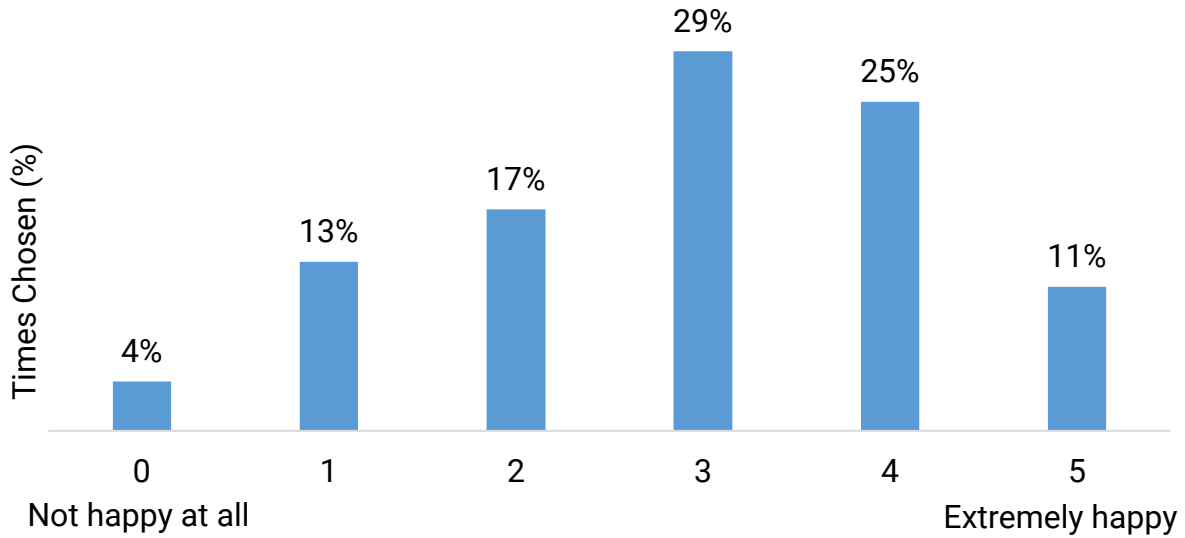


At the time of this survey, how satisfied are you with your child's education?

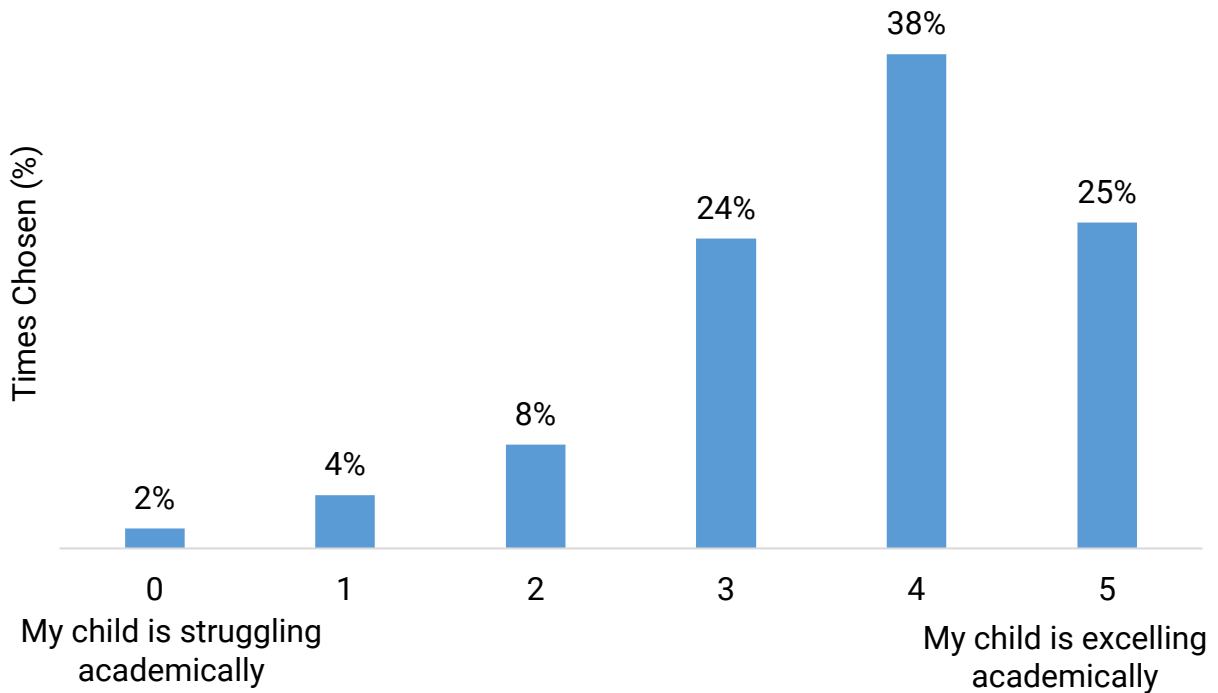
(sample size=1400)



**At the time of this survey, how happy is your child with their education?  
(sample size=1390)**



**How well do you believe your child is doing academically right now?  
(sample size=1573)**



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