

# *Do School Boards Represent Parents' Interests?*

**Michael Hartney**

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# Important caveats

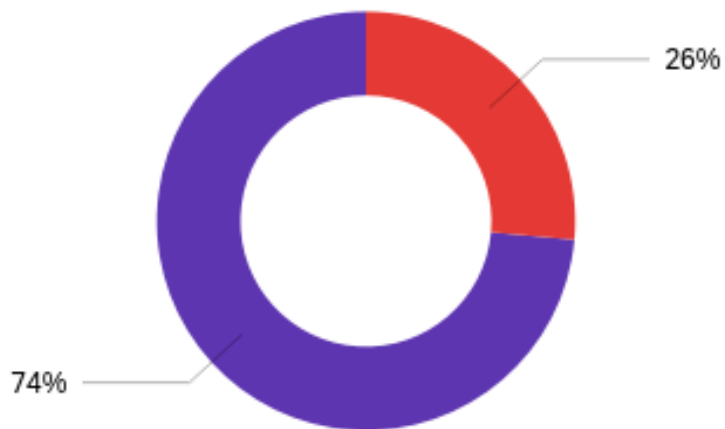
Which issues?

- Technical and “difficult” or value-based and “easy”
- Subject to federal/state directives?

Which type of board?

- Delegate- or trustee-oriented

When faced with a situation where your own views conflict with the views held by a majority of your district's constituents:



- It is more important that my vote reflects the views of my constituents
- It is more important that my vote reflects my informed judgement

# Important caveats

Which issues?

- Technical and “difficult” or value-based and “easy”
- Subject to federal/state directives?

Which type of board?

- Delegate- or trustee-oriented


Which parents?

- Parents disagree!
- Partisanship now looms especially large

# Gallup poll: **May 2020**

**7%** of Democratic parents preferred fully virtual learning when school resumed in the fall of 2020; **40%** wanted fully in-person.



**Donald J. Trump** 

@realDonaldTrump



SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!

2:40 PM · Jul 6, 2020 · [Twitter for iPhone](#)

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**80.6K** Retweets   **361.9K** Likes

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# Gallup poll: July 2020

**41%** of Democratic parents preferred fully virtual learning when school resumed in the fall of 2020; **10%** wanted fully in-person.

# Organizing parents is challenging

## ‘Parent Unions’ Seek to Join Policy Debates



By [Sean Cavanagh](#) — March 06, 2012 ⌚ 9 min read



Gwendolyn Samuel, 46, at laptop, founder of Connecticut Parents Union, works with student volunteers at her Meriden, Conn., home, in preparation for an education rally on March 14.

— Christopher Capozziello for Education Week



# Parent-Power Groups Demand Bigger Voice In School Policies

By DIANE GRANAT

**L**AST fall, conservative parents in Elk Grove Village, Ill., decided their children were receiving too much sex education at too early an age. After demanding more control over the curriculum, parents were placed on a committee to review textbooks and films for sex-education classes.

Equally outspoken are parents from the west end of Minneapolis who meet once a month to discuss school finances, declining enrollment and other

Yet, Stanley Salett, senior associate of the National Committee for Citizens in Education, observed that groups like these often "spring up during a crisis, burn brightly and then fade when the issue is past."

The most prevalent kind of federally mandated councils are parent boards that oversee Head Start and Title I programs for low-income children. There are as many as 900,000 parents who serve on Title I panels.

Several states also have enacted laws that require parent advisory councils. In Florida and South Carolina, laws say that parent committees must

parents council rather than a parents advisory council.

"We took out advisory because we want to be autonomous, not an arm of the superintendent," said Bunny Davis, former chairman and now a Minneapolis School Board candidate.

Minneapolis parents and educators note that their councils have been successful because of strong administrators who were willing to relinquish some power. "If parent involvement is to be meaningful, the superintendent has to be very open and honest with parents," said the Minneapolis East Area Superintendent, Ken Northwick. "Parents have to know what they're doing will be part of the decision. If you play games, they will be turned off. And once you turn them off they're not going to come back."

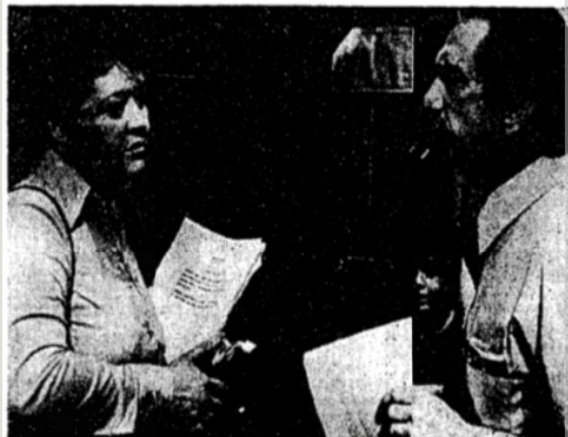
Many advocates of more substantial parent participation place their hopes in the newest movement among parent activists: school-site management. Experiments in California, Florida and Salt Lake City indicate that local school councils may be the antidote to increased decision-making by the courts, the Federal Government and state legislatures. The purpose is to decentralize decision-making by giving parents more authority over budget, personnel, curriculum and other policies at their child's school.

By including faculty members on the governing committees, the concept emphasizes sharing the power between educators and parents. Usually parents make up at least 51 percent of the school-site council, to insure that their voices are heard.

"School-site management is a whole commitment that says parents are very equal participants in the process of running a school and evaluating how well that school has done," said J. William Rioex, a senior associate of the national committee.

In Salt Lake City, councils at each school made up of parents and school employees are concerned with everything from dress codes to the length of the school day. Superintendent Donald Thomas said the Salt Lake City councils were created in 1972 as a preventive measure. By involving parents in important decisions at their local schools, he said, he hopes to avoid

No longer willing to remain behind the bake-sale counter, these parents are part of a new wave of parent participation in school. Unlike the P.T.A. boosters of the past who were content raising money for new playground equipment, these parents are seeking a louder voice in substantial issues affecting their children's education.



The New York Times / Robert M. Klein

A parent confronts Manhattan school principal over reading tests

# Organizing parents is challenging

“An organization may be formed in a burst of member enthusiasm or purposive commitment, but enthusiasm tends to wane and commitments to falter.”

–James Q. Wilson (1973)

*Political Organizations*

# Organizing parents is challenging



**WON'T  
BACK  
DOWN**



# Organizing parents is challenging

“Over the last two decades millions of Americans have withdrawn from the affairs of their communities ... **PTA membership dipped from more than 12 million in 1964 to 7 million today.** Obviously, the NEA has bucked this trend. Our growth has been strong and has been steady. In 1964 we numbered 330,000. And now we are over 2.2 million strong.”

—Keith Geiger, NEA President (1990–96)

# Chubb and Moe (1990)

“The public schools are not meant to be theirs [parents] to control ... they are agencies of society as a whole, and everyone has a right to participate in their governance. Parents and students have a right to participate too. But they have no right to win...

**... In the end, [parents] have to take what society gives them.”**

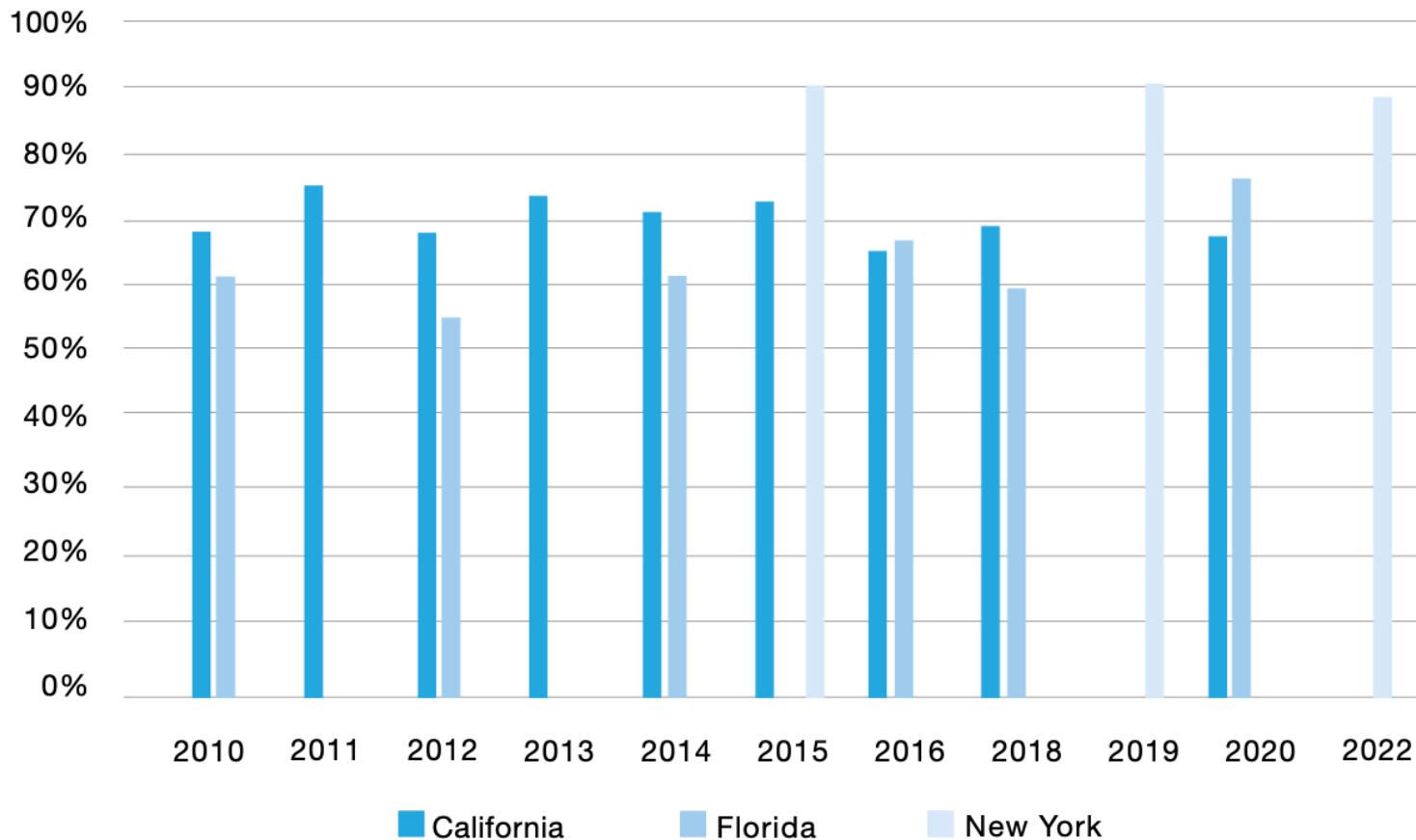
**TABLE 7.3 School-board member ratings of different stakeholders' levels of political activism in local school politics**

Study authors	Survey year	Board sample	Teachers unions	Parent groups	Business community
Hartney and Hayes	2018	California	1st	2nd	3rd
Hartney	2015	National	1st	2nd	3rd
Hartney and Wegrzyn	2013	Indiana	1st	2nd	3rd
Hartney and Dunn-Pirio	2012	Virginia	1st (tie)	1st (tie)	3rd
Hess	2002	National	1st	2nd	3rd
Moe	2001	California	1st	2nd	3rd

**TABLE 7.4 Participation in local politics by various education stakeholders**

	Local politics		General politics		Nonpolitical civic engagement	
	Vote in last local election	Attend local political meeting	Contribute money to a candidate/ cause	Contact an elected official	Volunteer (any group)	Volunteer (service group)
Teachers (public)	82%	41%	16%	29%	73%	30%
Parents	58%	17%	12%	17%	77%	31%
Homeowners	74%	21%	20%	24%	69%	40%
Teachers (private)	77%	20%	8%	22%	80%	25%

# Union-Endorsed Candidates' Electoral Success over Time, by State





When the board is evaluating the superintendent's performance, please indicate the importance of each of the following. (Individual Board Members only)

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Somewhat Important	Not at all Important	Total
<b>Student achievement</b>	<b>585</b>	<b>216</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>878</b>
	<b>66.6%</b>	<b>24.6%</b>	<b>6.2%</b>	<b>1.9%</b>	<b>0.7%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Financial management</b>	<b>593</b>	<b>238</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>878</b>
	<b>67.5%</b>	<b>27.1%</b>	<b>3.8%</b>	<b>0.9%</b>	<b>0.7%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Community engagement</b>	<b>348</b>	<b>369</b>	<b>125</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>877</b>
	<b>39.7%</b>	<b>42.1%</b>	<b>14.3%</b>	<b>3.4%</b>	<b>0.6%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>District safety</b>	<b>388</b>	<b>286</b>	<b>142</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>876</b>
	<b>44.3%</b>	<b>32.6%</b>	<b>16.2%</b>	<b>5.8%</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Effective working relationship with others</b>	<b>475</b>	<b>317</b>	<b>67</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>875</b>
	<b>54.3%</b>	<b>36.2%</b>	<b>7.7%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>0.5%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Parental satisfaction</b>	<b>210</b>	<b>325</b>	<b>240</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>874</b>
	<b>24.0%</b>	<b>37.2%</b>	<b>27.5%</b>	<b>9.2%</b>	<b>2.2%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Meets goals</b>	<b>548</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>874</b>
	<b>62.7%</b>	<b>31.7%</b>	<b>4.7%</b>	<b>0.5%</b>	<b>0.5%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

When the board is evaluating your performance, please indicate the importance of each of the following. (Superintendents Only)

	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Somewhat Important	Not at all Important	Total
<b>Student achievement</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>% of total</b>	<b>40.3%</b>	<b>38.7%</b>	<b>14.3%</b>	<b>5.0%</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Financial management</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>% of total</b>	<b>55.5%</b>	<b>39.5%</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>2.5%</b>	<b>0.8%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Community engagement</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>% of total</b>	<b>30.3%</b>	<b>44.5%</b>	<b>22.7%</b>	<b>2.5%</b>	<b>0.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>District safety</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>% of total</b>	<b>28.8%</b>	<b>35.6%</b>	<b>27.1%</b>	<b>6.8%</b>	<b>1.7%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Effective working relationship with others</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>% of total</b>	<b>49.2%</b>	<b>39.8%</b>	<b>9.3%</b>	<b>0.8%</b>	<b>0.8%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
<b>Parental satisfaction</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>49</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>119</b>
<b>% of total</b>	<b>21.8%</b>	<b>41.2%</b>	<b>26.1%</b>	<b>8.4%</b>	<b>2.5%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>
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**Baseline condition (N=295)**

In some school districts, information about a teacher's impact on their students' test scores is made available to parents and the general public. What do you think about this idea? Would you be inclined to favor or oppose such a policy in your district?

**Parent treatment (N=275)**

In some school districts, information about a teacher's impact on their students' test scores is made available to parents and the general public. *According to a recent survey conducted by Harvard University researchers, 70 percent of parents nationally, including a majority of parents in [R's state shown] SUPPORT such a policy.* What do you think about this idea? Would you be inclined to favor or oppose such a policy in your district?

**Teacher treatment (N=300)**

In some school districts, information about a teacher's impact on their students' test scores is made available to parents and the general public. *According to a recent survey conducted by Harvard University researchers, 70 percent of teachers nationally, including a majority of teachers in [R's state shown] OPPOSE such a policy.* What do you think about this idea? Would you be inclined to favor or oppose such a policy in your district?

**Experimental condition**

**Baseline condition**  
Board members receive  
no specific information  
about constituent opinion

**Parent treatment**  
Board members are  
informed that parents  
strongly support reform

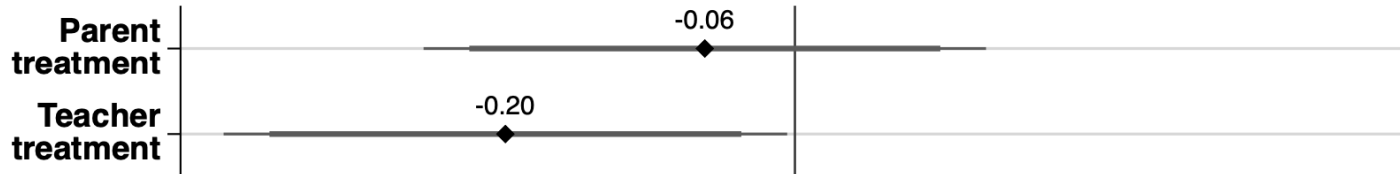
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35 40 45 50 55 60 65 70

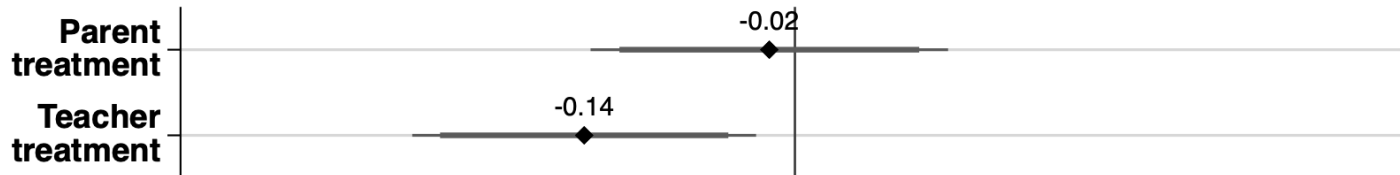
Percentage of board members supporting reform



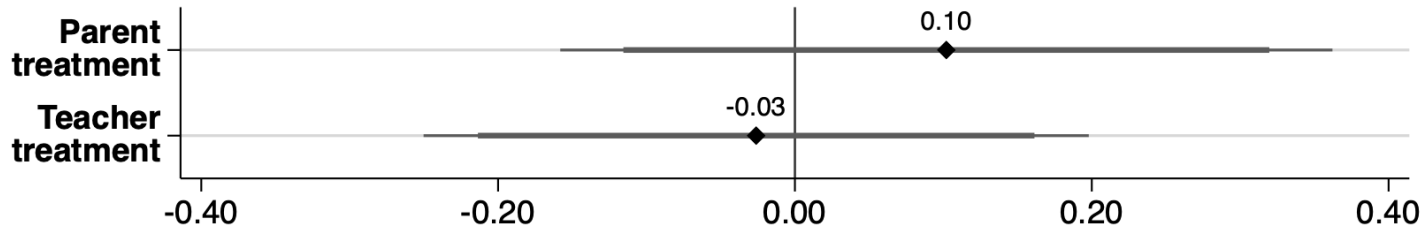
Teacher groups are politically active  
but parent groups are not



Both parent and teacher groups  
are politically active



Parent groups are politically active  
but teacher groups are are not



Effect of treatments on board-member support for reform

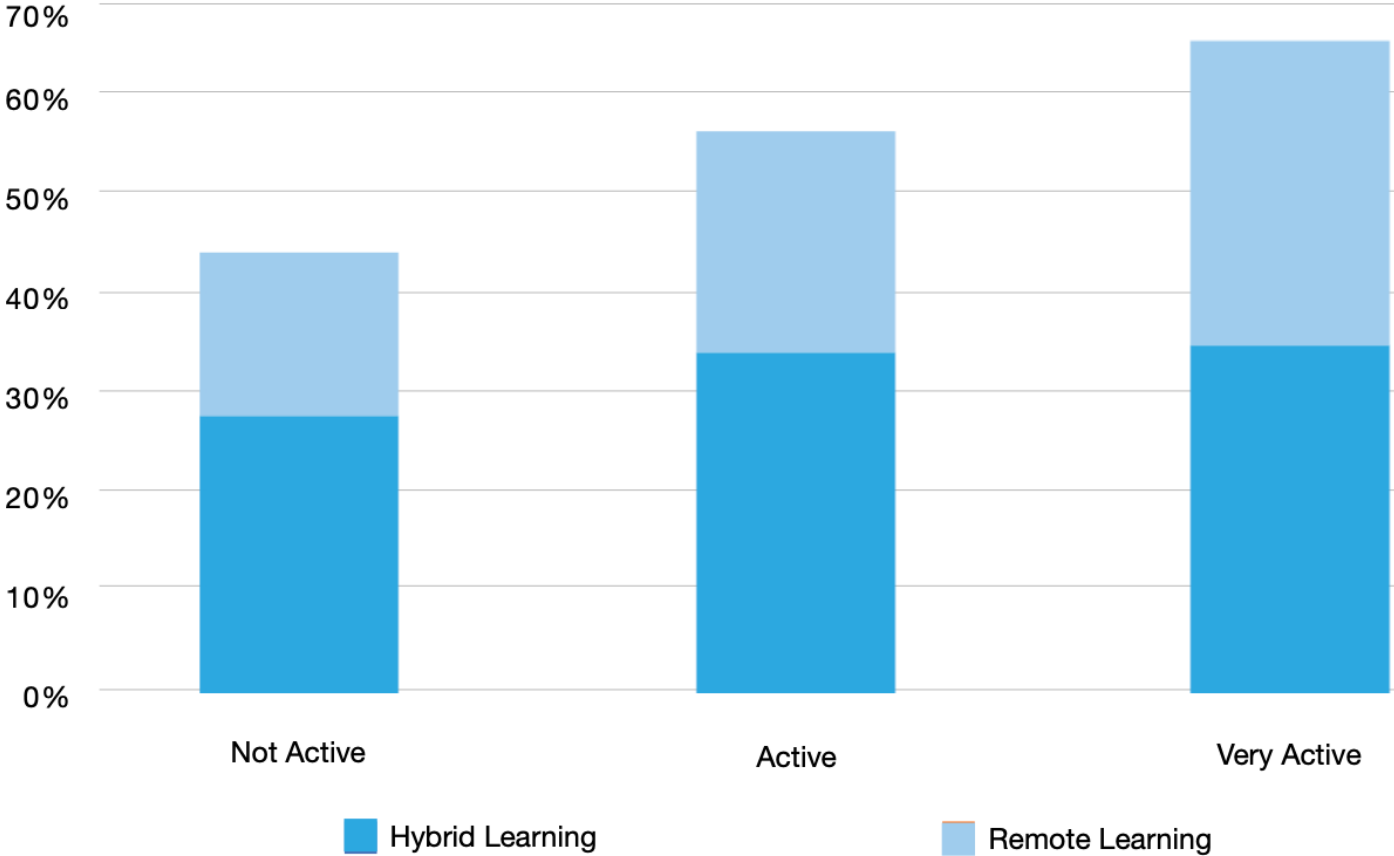
# Lessons from the pandemic

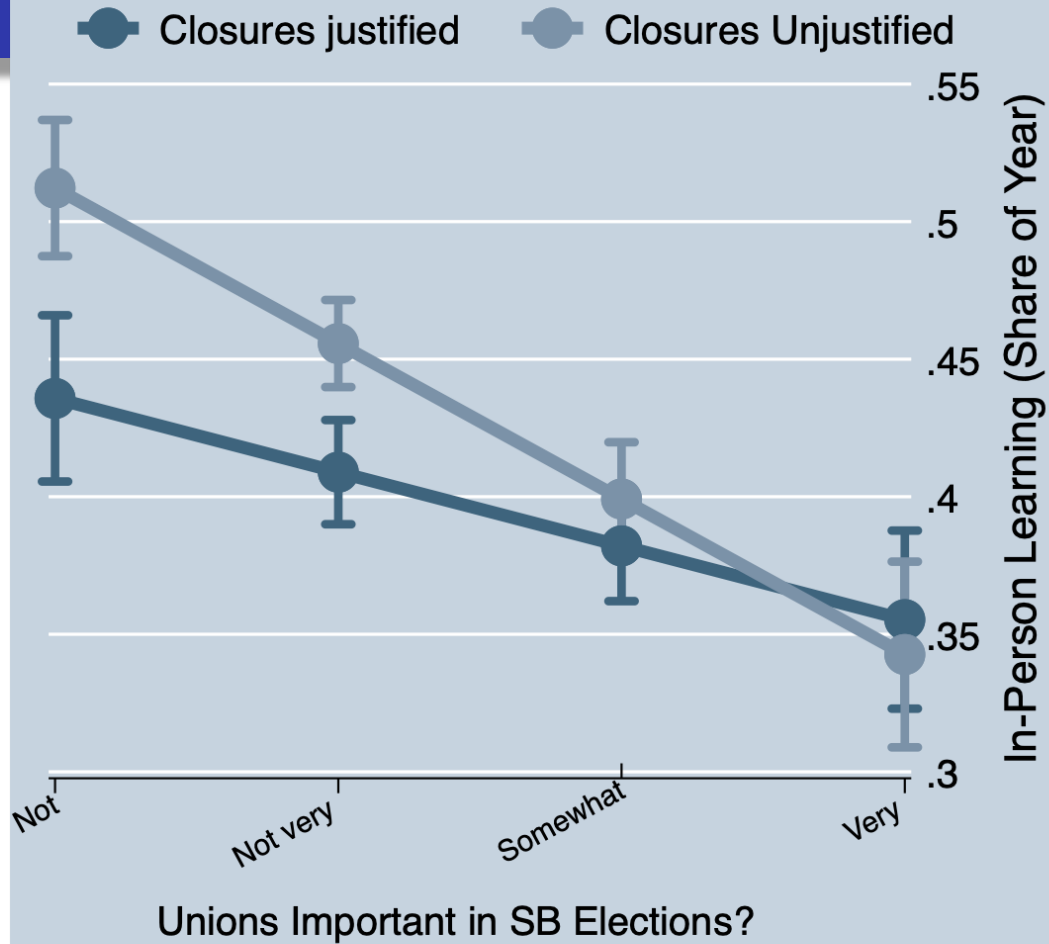
SLATE.COM

## How the School Reopening Debate Is Tearing One of America's Most Elite Suburbs Apart



# Share of 2020–21 School Year Students Spent Learning Outside the Classroom by Teachers' Unions Political Activity



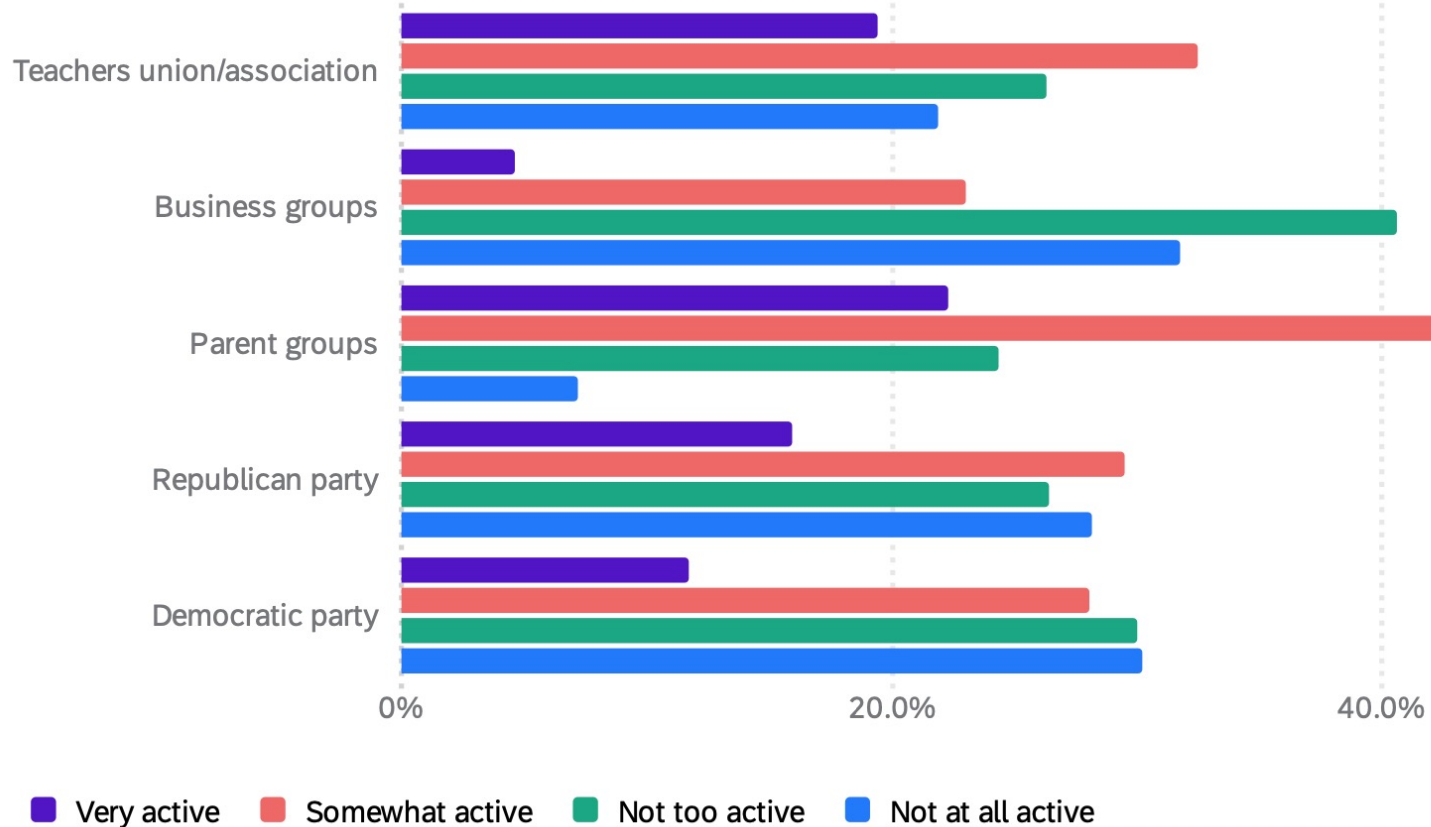




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# Parents' groups gaining ground?



# Conclusions

- The pandemic energized some parents and mobilized them to participate in school board politics
- Yet school boards often remain insulated from parent pressure (i.e., incentives around collective bargaining)
- Greater transparency + more low-cost opportunities to participate (e.g., on-cycle elections, open CB)
- Choice can be helpful but not always a panacea for promoting equal access to high-performing schools