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**THE STATE OF THE NATION:  
A 50-STATE COVID-19 SURVEY**  
**REPORT #11: PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL  
REOPENING SAFETY IN THE UNITED STATES**

USA, August 2020

Matthew A. Baum, Harvard University  
Roy H. Perlis, Harvard Medical School  
Katherine Ognyanova, Rutgers University  
Hanyu Chwe, Northeastern University  
David Lazer, Northeastern University  
James Druckman, Northwestern University  
Jon Green, Northeastern University  
Mauricio Santillana, Harvard Medical School  
John Della Volpe, Harvard University  
Alexi Quintana, Northeastern University  
Matthew Simonson, Northeastern University



Northeastern University  
Network Science Institute



HARVARD Kennedy School  
SHORENSTEIN CENTER  
on Media, Politics and Public Policy



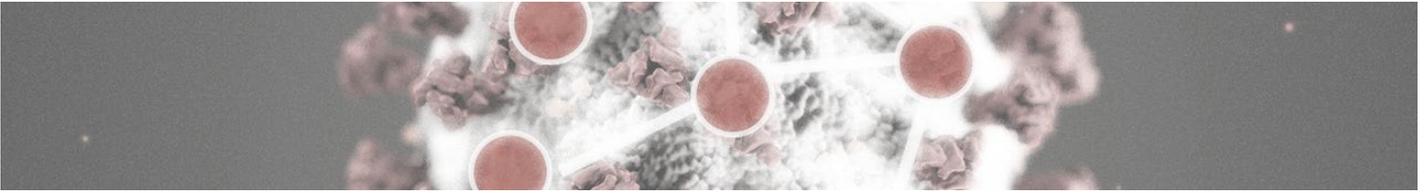
HARVARD  
MEDICAL SCHOOL



RUTGERS  
THE STATE UNIVERSITY  
OF NEW JERSEY



Northwestern  
University



## Report of August 18, 2020, v.1

**From:** The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States

*A joint project of:*

Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

**Authors:** Matthew A. Baum (Harvard University); Roy H. Perlis (Harvard Medical School); Katherine Ognyanova (Rutgers University); Hanyu Chwe (Northeastern University); David Lazer (Northeastern University); James Druckman (Northwestern University); Jon Green (Northeastern University); Mauricio Santillana (Harvard Medical School); John Della Volpe (Harvard University); Alexi Quintana (Northeastern University); and Matthew Simonson (Northeastern University)

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Northeastern University  
Network Science Institute



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University

# COVER MEMO

## Summary Memo— August 18, 2020

*The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States*

**Partners:** Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University

**Authors:** Matthew A. Baum (Harvard University); Roy H. Perlis (Harvard Medical School); Katherine Ognyanova (Rutgers University); Hanyu Chwe (Northeastern University); David Lazer (Northeastern University); James Druckman (Northwestern University); Jon Green (Northeastern University); Mauricio Santillana (Harvard Medical School); John Della Volpe (Harvard University); Alexi Quintana (Northeastern University); and Matthew Simonson (Northeastern University)

From July 10 to 26 we conducted the seventh wave of a large, 50-state survey, some results of which are presented here. You can find previous reports online at [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org).

### Note on methods:

We surveyed 19,058 individuals across all 50 states plus the District of Columbia. The survey was conducted on 10-26 July 2020 by PureSpectrum via an online, nonprobability sample, with state-level representative quotas for race/ethnicity, age, and gender (for methodological details on the other waves, see [covidstates.org](http://covidstates.org)). In addition to balancing on these dimensions, we reweighted our data using demographic characteristics to match the U.S. population with respect to race/ethnicity, age, gender, education, and living in urban, suburban, or rural areas. This was the seventh in a series of surveys we have been conducting since April 2020, examining attitudes and behaviors regarding COVID-19 in the United States.

### Contact information:

For additional information and press requests contact:

- Matthew A. Baum at [matthew\\_baum@hks.harvard.edu](mailto:matthew_baum@hks.harvard.edu)
- Roy H. Perlis at [rperlis@mgh.harvard.edu](mailto:rperlis@mgh.harvard.edu)
- Katherine Ognyanova at [katya.ognyanova@rutgers.edu](mailto:katya.ognyanova@rutgers.edu)
- David Lazer at [d.lazer@neu.edu](mailto:d.lazer@neu.edu)
- James Druckman at [druckman@northwestern.edu](mailto:druckman@northwestern.edu)
- Mauricio Santillana at [msantill@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:msantill@fas.harvard.edu)
- John Della Volpe at [john\\_della\\_volpe@hks.harvard.edu](mailto:john_della_volpe@hks.harvard.edu)

Or visit us at [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org).

## Contents

Perceptions of school reopening safety .....	5
1. Is it safe to reopen schools? .....	5
2. Should schools reopen for in-person learning? .....	11
3. Local COVID-19 cases and deaths .....	13
4. Appendix: Perceived school safety by state .....	14

# Perceptions of school reopening safety

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[An increasing number of school districts](#) across the United States have announced that they will provide entirely remote learning when school resumes this fall. Others, like New York City, continue to consider alternatives, including hybrid models in which students attend school part-time. While many other countries have succeeded in reopening schools without a resurgence of cases (with some notable [exceptions](#)), they reopened in a very different context, with rates of infection in the community far lower than in many places in the United States. On the other hand, the federal government, and some [state governments](#), continue to focus on the importance of reopening. Another complication is the role of teachers' unions, who have expressed discomfort about their teachers' safety and their ability to provide a safe environment for students. And among schools already reopening, some students have already [tested positive](#) for COVID-19.

Parents of school-age children thus confront difficult decisions about their children's education - decisions that will hinge on whether they believe schools can be made safe. We surveyed 19,058 adults in the 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia for 2 weeks beginning July 10 and ending July 26, asking about their perception of the safety of returning to school. We also asked a subset of respondents whether they support reopening schools for in-person classes in the fall. We further aimed to understand whether these comfort levels vary depending on rates of infection in their community, and on other attitudes about COVID-19.

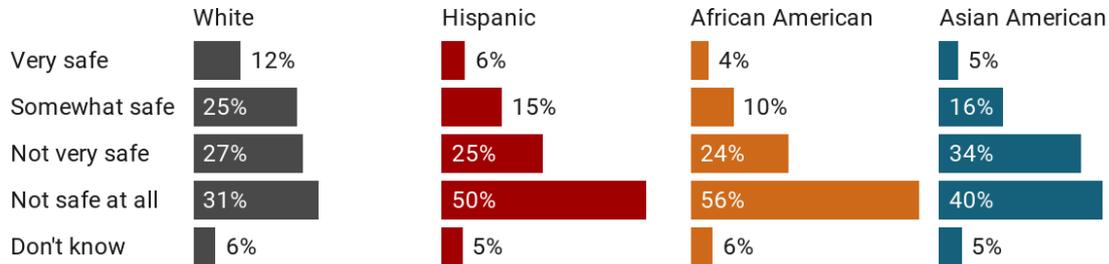
## 1. Is it safe to reopen schools?

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**Most Americans do not believe that it is safe for K-12 students to return to school. In all, only 31% of respondents believe that returning to school is very safe (10%) or somewhat safe (21%).** Beneath the surface, however, we see differences across groups of Americans. For instance, women are less likely to consider returning to school very or somewhat safe (28% vs 34% for men), as are non-white respondents (19% vs 37% among white respondents).

## Perceived safety of school reopening by race

Based on what you know at this time, how safe do you think it is for K-12 students in your community to return to school?



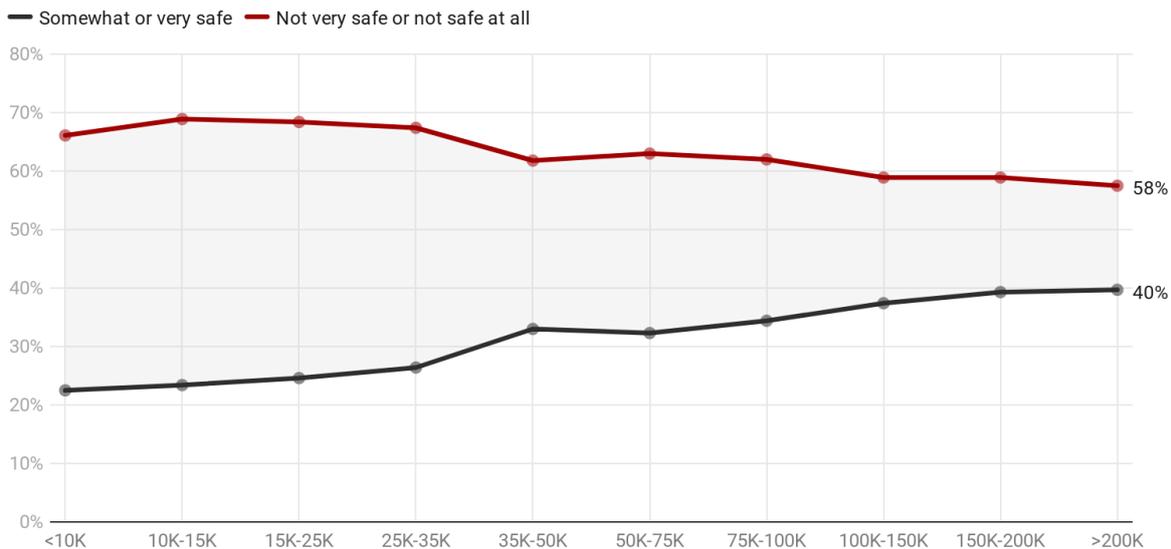
National sample, N = 19,058, Time period: 7/10/2020-7/26/2020

Source: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org)  
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**We also see marked differences in attitudes toward the safety of students returning to schools by income**, with the wealthiest respondents (incomes over \$200,000) almost twice as likely as the least wealthy respondents (incomes under \$10,000) to express confidence in school safety (40% versus 22%).

## Perceived safety of school reopening by income

Based on what you know at this time, how safe do you think it is for K-12 students in your community to return to school?



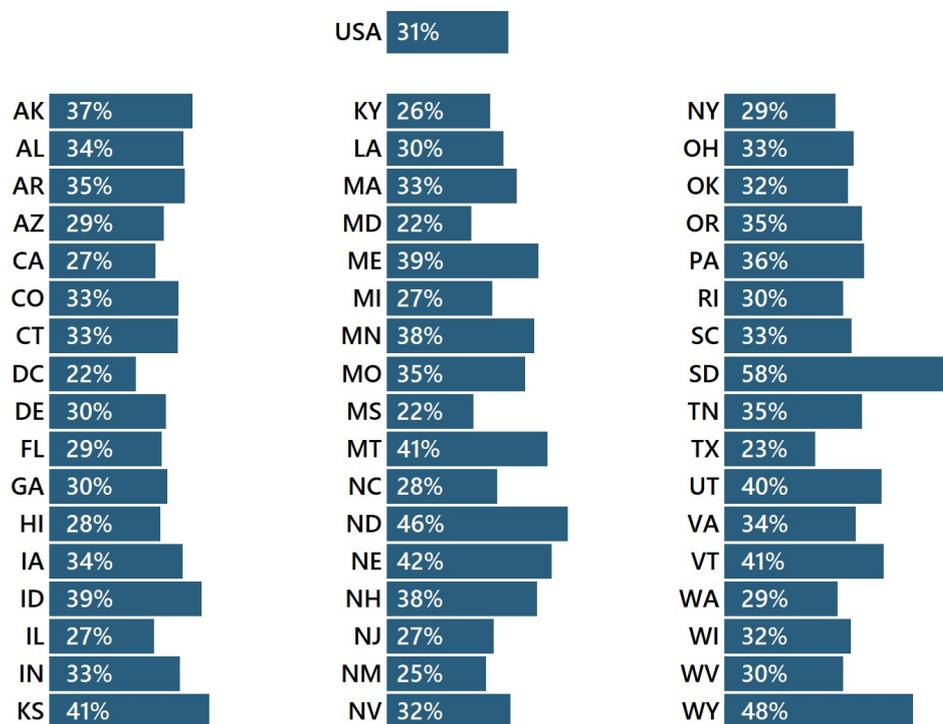
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**We find a great deal of diversity across states in beliefs regarding the safety of K-12 students returning to school in the fall.** At the low end, fewer than one in four respondents in three states (Maryland, Mississippi and Texas) and the District of Columbia believe it would be very or somewhat safe to send K-12 students to school. At the high end, 58% of respondents in South Dakota believe it would be safe to send K-12 students to school this fall. In all, in every state (and the District of Columbia) except South Dakota, fewer than half of respondents believe it would be very or somewhat safe for students to return to school in the fall, while fewer than one third of respondents in 24 states believe it would be safe to do so. Once again, the takeaway appears to be that most Americans in most places are not confident that reopening schools can be done safely. Also noteworthy, the five states exhibiting the highest levels of confidence in the safety of schools are solid Republican-led states, while, among the five least confident states, two are solidly Republican and three (including the District of Columbia) are solidly Democratic.

### Proportion of Americans who believe school reopening is safe

Based on what you know at this time, how safe do you think it is for K-12 students in your community to return to school? [ Percent respondents who say "somewhat safe" or "very safe" ]

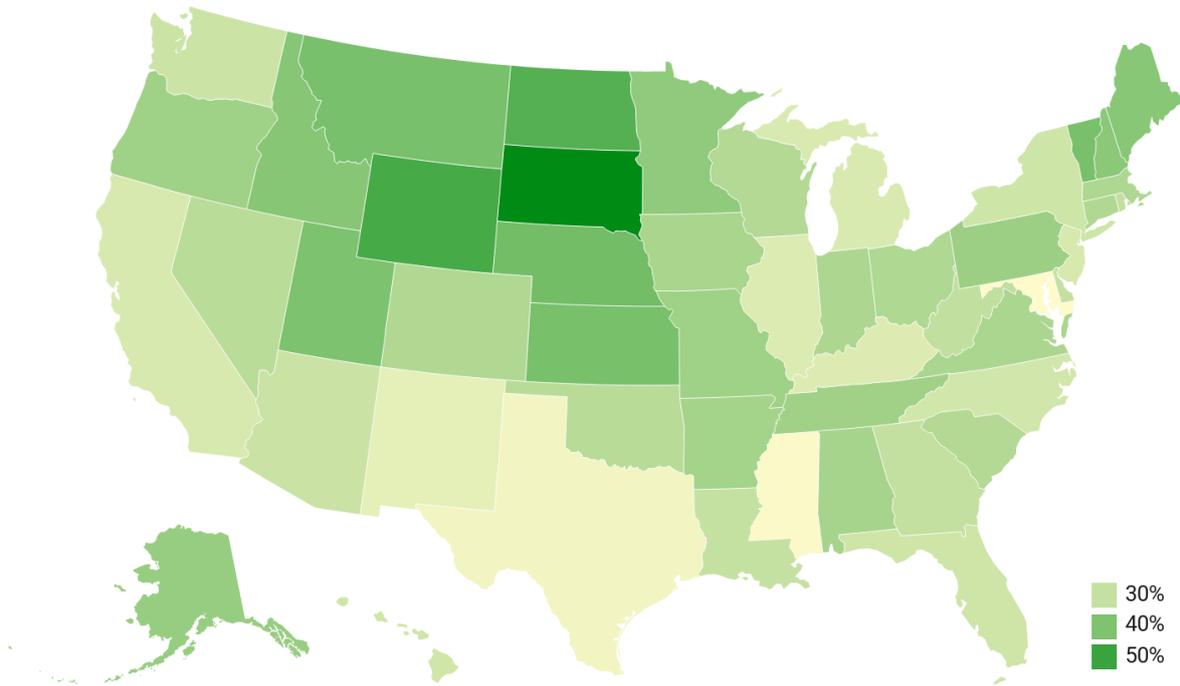


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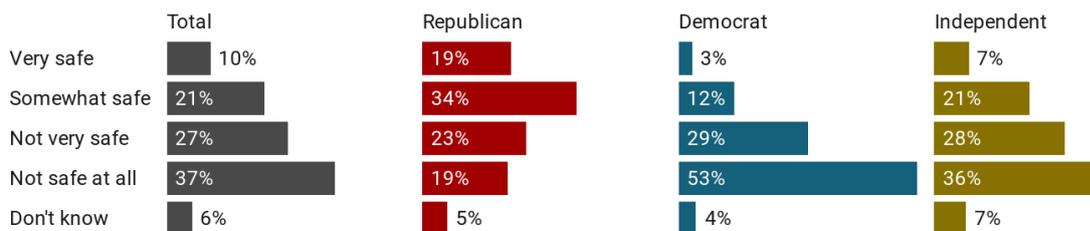
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Map: The COVID-19 Consortium for Understanding the Public's Policy Preferences Across States (A joint project of: Northeastern University, Harvard University, Rutgers University, and Northwestern University) [www.covidstates.org](http://www.covidstates.org)  
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**As with so many other responses to COVID-19, attitudes about school safety differ profoundly by political affiliation.** Among those who identify as Republican, 53% believe it would be safe for K-12 students to return to school compared to 15% of Democrats and 28% of independents.

## Perceived safety of school reopening by political party

Based on what you know at this time, how safe do you think it is for K-12 students in your community to return to school?



National sample, N = 19,058, Time period: 7/10/2020-7/26/2020

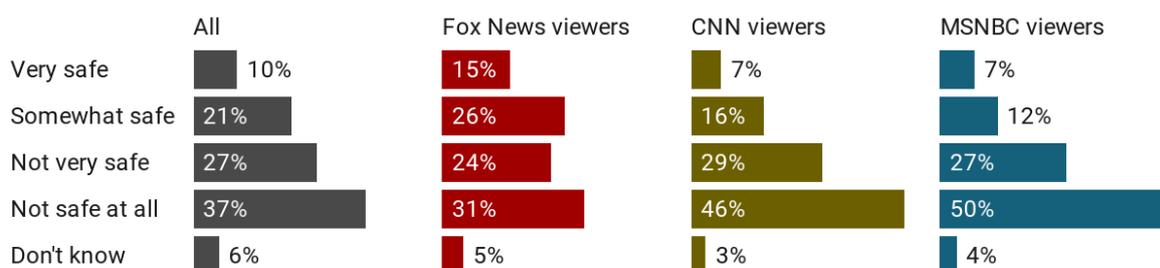
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We see little variation between Republicans and independents with school-age children in the household and those without children. Over half (52%) of Republican parents and 30% of politically independent parents see students returning to school as safe, compared to 54% and 28% of Republicans and independents without children. Democrats with children, however, are eight percentage points more likely to believe schools are safe than their counterparts without children (21% vs. 13%). This seemingly counterintuitive difference among Democrats may reflect the greater direct stakes parents have in the reopening of schools, or it may reflect the presumably greater attention parents of school-age children are paying to the plans of their local school districts.

To assess the first possible explanation, we compared attitudes among parents with school-age children who indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic had forced them to stop or scale back work to take care of their children with those who did not indicate being similarly forced to scale back or stop working. We find very small differences between parents who did or did not have to stop or scale back work to care for their kids (18% vs 22% among Democrats; 58% vs 51% among Republicans; and 32% vs 29% among independents, respectively). This suggests that perceived self-interest does not fully account for the differential among Democratic parents of school-age children compared to respondents without school-age children.

## Perceived safety of school reopening by media use

Based on what you know at this time, how safe do you think it is for K-12 students in your community to return to school?



National sample, N = 19,058, Time period: 7/10/2020-7/26/2020

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The effects of partisan polarization manifest in numerous ways, extending to differences in indirectly related attitudes and behaviors among partisans. For instance, **among respondents who indicate that they got news about the pandemic from Fox News in the last 24 hours, 41% believe schools are very or somewhat safe to reopen. The corresponding percentages for respondents who cited CNN or MSNBC as sources of news about the pandemic are far lower, 23% and 19%, respectively.**

If we further limit the comparisons to respondents who recently got COVID news from Fox, *but not CNN or MSNBC* – or who got information from one of the other two cable news networks, *but not Fox* – the gaps further increase (48% for Fox watchers who eschew CNN and MSNBC, compared to 16% and 12%, respectively, for CNN and MSNBC watchers who eschew Fox).

If we break news consumption down by party, we find additional evidence of news sources correlating with attitudes regarding reopening safety. Among Republican respondents who report getting COVID-19 news from Fox News, 59% indicate that they believe it is safe for K-12 students to return to school. The corresponding percentages among Republicans who report getting COVID-19 news from CNN and MSNBC are 46% and 43%, respectively. Among Democrats, the corresponding percentages for consumers of Fox, CNN, and MSNBC are 21%, 13%, and 11%, respectively. Finally, among independents, the corresponding percentages are 35%, 21%, and 17%. **Within all three partisan groups, watching Fox News as a source of information about COVID-19 is associated with a higher likelihood of believing that it is safe for students to return to school than watching either CNN or MSNBC.**

Of course, in the aggregate analysis, it is difficult to determine whether partisan preferences are driving respondents to the different news sources, or whether these gaps are attributable to differences in the way the pandemic is covered by these news outlets. Disaggregating respondents into partisan subgroups and comparing respondents with shared partisanship but different media consumption habits helps address this ambiguity. However, it remains possible that different types of Democrats, Republicans, and independents are inclined to seek news from these different cable networks. (For instance, perhaps relatively conservative Democrats are more likely than other Democrats to watch Fox, while relatively liberal Republicans are more likely than other Republicans to watch CNN.) Whichever way the causal arrows run, however, the gaps remain substantial.

As one might expect, given the above partisan differences, we find that **respondents who indicate that they trust President Trump to manage the COVID-19 crisis, or plan to vote for President Trump in 2020 are far more likely to believe it is safe for students to return to school than their counterparts who do not** (53% vs 16% in the former case and 58% vs. 18% in the latter). We find a near inverse pattern when we compare respondents who do or do not trust Joe Biden (20% vs. 41%) and do or do not intend to vote for him (14% vs. 42%), though in both cases the differences are somewhat smaller than for the sitting President.

**We also find that the nation’s divisions over mask-wearing – which are also heavily influenced by partisanship, as we have shown in a [previous report](#) – strongly predict attitudes regarding the safety of students returning to school.** Respondents who

indicate that they followed guidelines regarding wearing a mask outside of the home somewhat or very closely in the last week were dramatically less likely to believe that it is safe to reopen schools (27% vs. 64%).

In sharp contrast to these gaping partisan differentials, **we found relatively minor gaps between parents who live with only young children in the household (ages 0-5) and their counterparts with preteen (age 6-12) or teenage (age 13-17) children**, though parents who live with children in the youngest age group were a bit less likely to consider schools safe (28%, compared to 34% and 32% for parents of pre-teens and teens, respectively).<sup>1</sup> The implication is that parents who live with children are not differentiating their attitudes based on whether the kids are in elementary, middle, or high school, despite emerging research suggesting that the risks associated with COVID-19 may vary for [children at different ages](#).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, **we found that parents of children under 18 who believe that most Americans follow health recommendations such as staying home or frequently washing their hands expressed greater confidence in the safety of schools** (46%, compared to 27% among parents who expressed less confidence in other Americans' compliance with health recommendations). The gap remains similar when we expand the sample to include all respondents, not just parents (41% vs. 25%).

## **2. Should schools reopen for in-person learning?**

We ask a subset of respondents (N=3,929) whether they support reopening school in their communities for in-person classes this fall. Overall, **only 27% support or strongly support reopening schools for in-person classes this fall. Among parents with non-adult children, 32% support reopening schools.**

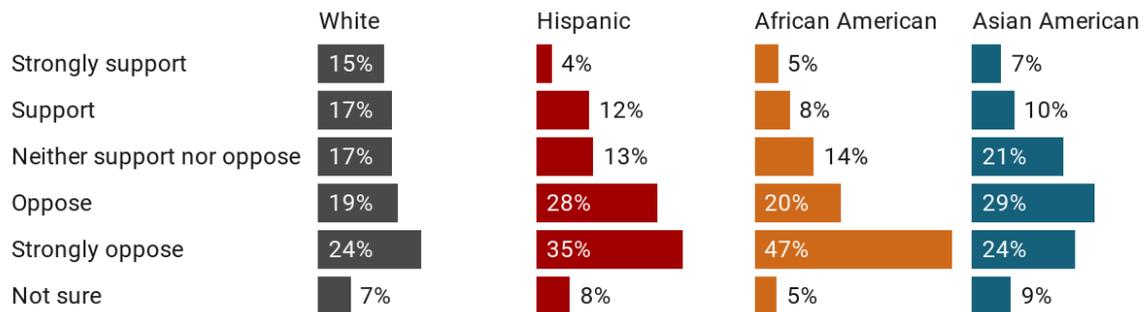
Once again, we see differences by race/ethnicity and partisanship (as well as, again, other factors related to partisanship). **White respondents are roughly twice as likely as Black, Hispanic, or Asian American respondents to support reopening schools** (32% for white respondents, compared to 13%, 16%, and 17%, respectively, of Black, Hispanic, and Asian American respondents).

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<sup>1</sup> Note that in order to estimate differences among parents of children at different ages, for each category we limited the sample to respondents to parents who report both having a child under age 18 and at least one child of the relevant age living in their household (0-5, 6-12, or 13-17), but *not* a child living in the home from any of the other age groups.

## Support for school reopening by race

Do you support reopening schools in your community for in-person classes this fall?



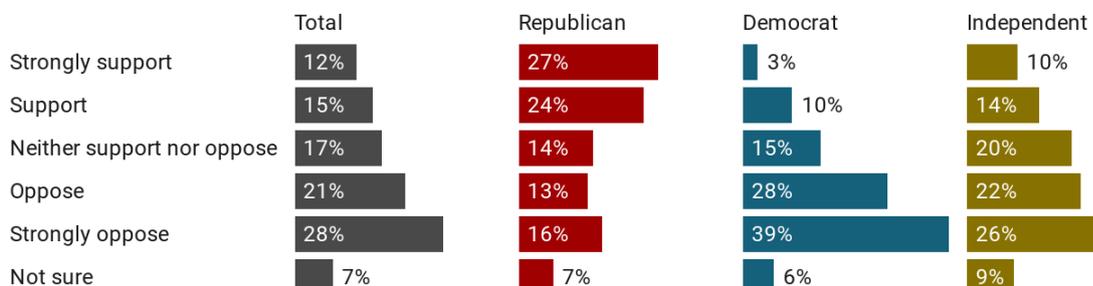
National sample, N = 3,929, Time period: 7/10/2020-7/26/2020

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Partisan differences are also substantial: **51% of Republicans, but only 13% of Democrats and 24% of independents, express support for reopening schools for in-person classes this fall.** Similarly, respondents who express an intent to vote for President Trump in 2020, or indicated that they trust the President to handle the COVID-19 crisis, are far more likely to support in-person classes in the fall, 55% and 50%, respectively, compared to 15% for respondents who do not intend to vote for President Trump and 13% for those who do not express trust in the President to manage the pandemic.

## Support for school reopening by political party

Do you support reopening schools in your community for in-person classes this fall?



National sample, N = 3,929, Time period: 7/10/2020-7/26/2020

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Political polarization again appears to manifest itself in multiple ways, reflecting the pervasive extent to which politics has shaped public views over what is nominally a public health crisis. For instance, similar to our findings above regarding perceptions of safety of school reopening, **respondents who indicate that they were following guidelines about wearing masks outside the home somewhat or very closely were far less likely to support in-person classes than their counterparts who indicated that they were not wearing masks (23% vs. 60%).**<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Local COVID-19 cases and deaths**

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We also consider how localized COVID-19 trends impact Americans' attitudes towards reopening by using the [New York Times' coronavirus case tracker](#). For each respondent, we calculate the average case or death count in their county or county-equivalent over the week prior to collecting responses. This indicator explains how an individual might be directly impacted by COVID-19 in their community.

**We find that attitudes regarding school reopening are only modestly related to the trend in local cases or deaths, though as one might expect, more cases or deaths are associated with a lower likelihood of believing that schools are safe or that they should reopen.**

About a third (35%) of respondents who have fewer cases in their county than our median respondent say it is safe for K-12 students to return to schools, compared to 27% of respondents living in counties with more cases than the median respondent. When we split respondents by the death rates in their counties, we find virtually identical results: 35% of those in counties with lower-than-median death rates say returning is safe, compared to 27% for those in counties with higher death rates.

Similarly, among those living in counties with below the median number of cases, 31% support reopening schools for in-person classes this fall, compared to 23% of those in counties with more cases than the median respondent. Among respondents with fewer deaths than the median respondent in their home counties, 32% support reopening.

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<sup>2</sup> Correlation cannot by itself establish causation – and this pattern does not definitively establish partisanship as the underlying cause of the relationship between mask wearing and attitudes regarding school safety. That said, this is one of multiple such correlations, suggesting that partisanship is a likely explanation for these patterns.

This contrasts with only 22% support among respondents in counties with more than the median number of deaths.

Of course, even county-level analysis may not be sufficient to measure local trends. Yet, these patterns do suggest that **attitudes around school reopening are only modestly influenced by local COVID-19 trends.**

## 4. Appendix: Perceived school safety by state

Table 1. Based on what you know at this time, how safe do you think it is for K-12 students in your community to return to school?							
	Very safe	Somewhat safe	Not very safe	Not safe at all	Don't know	Error Margin	N
National	9.5	21.4	26.5	37.1	5.5	0.0	19042
AK	7.8	28.7	26.4	28.7	8.3	10.0	128
AL	11.5	22.7	24.2	36.4	5.3	6.1	436
AR	10.9	23.7	29.0	31.1	5.3	6.4	387
AZ	13.2	15.9	20.6	42.7	7.6	7.6	332
CA	8.0	19.1	25.3	43.7	3.9	5.9	547
CO	12.2	20.7	27.2	34.8	5.1	6.6	364
CT	6.7	26.0	25.8	37.5	4.0	6.1	405
DC	8.2	13.8	23.6	49.8	4.5	7.1	276
DE	8.5	21.3	32.7	32.8	4.7	7.5	285
FL	11.0	17.6	23.5	42.7	5.3	5.5	490
GA	11.0	19.1	18.4	44.3	7.2	5.8	436
HI	4.4	23.8	28.1	38.7	5.0	7.3	291
IA	9.4	24.5	25.1	33.9	7.1	5.9	410
ID	11.6	27.2	26.4	26.9	8.0	5.7	350
IL	8.2	18.4	28.0	41.4	3.9	5.9	469
IN	10.1	23.2	32.1	28.7	5.9	6.4	319
KS	10.5	30.3	20.8	31.8	6.7	5.9	365
KY	6.8	19.6	24.6	44.0	4.9	6.2	392

LA	11.6	18.2	28.1	38.4	3.6	6.7	404
MA	9.7	23.4	35.5	26.9	4.5	5.8	363
MD	4.6	17.0	32.8	42.5	3.0	5.7	462
ME	10.7	27.9	30.1	25.8	5.5	6.0	314
MI	8.7	18.2	26.8	40.5	5.8	6.4	366
MN	11.8	25.7	26.4	27.8	8.3	5.7	382
MO	11.9	23.4	27.4	33.6	3.6	5.9	358
MS	4.9	17.1	29.6	40.8	7.7	6.8	374
MT	14.3	26.6	27.8	28.4	2.9	6.2	292
NC	8.5	19.6	28.5	38.8	4.7	5.6	428
ND	11.9	34.1	18.6	27.8	7.5	8.3	209
NE	12.3	29.6	27.4	24.5	6.1	6.0	336
NH	12.6	25.6	28.4	27.9	5.5	5.9	314
NJ	5.7	21.5	26.4	36.5	9.9	6.4	391
NM	6.5	18.7	24.8	38.8	11.2	7.7	335
NV	11.0	20.5	19.3	38.5	10.6	6.5	432
NY	9.2	19.3	33.1	31.5	6.8	5.4	465
OH	11.2	21.8	21.4	38.7	6.9	5.3	478
OK	9.2	22.5	29.3	37.0	2.0	6.8	381
OR	12.5	22.8	26.7	33.9	4.2	5.9	397
PA	11.7	24.0	30.5	30.9	3.0	5.5	478
RI	10.6	19.8	31.5	34.4	3.8	6.4	321
SC	9.4	23.1	23.2	40.2	4.1	6.0	421
SD	23.5	34.8	24.2	13.0	4.6	7.5	256
TN	13.0	22.2	28.5	31.9	4.5	5.5	467
TX	8.2	15.1	24.2	48.4	4.1	5.9	482
UT	12.2	28.0	25.0	29.6	5.1	5.6	441
VA	10.4	23.2	22.7	40.1	3.6	6.1	402
VT	12.6	28.2	26.7	28.5	4.0	7.3	201
WA	7.8	21.1	31.8	37.1	2.2	5.6	445
WI	10.8	21.6	28.9	34.0	4.8	5.2	445
WV	8.6	21.8	27.2	36.9	5.5	6.8	363
WY	13.8	34.4	19.3	25.9	6.5	9.5	157