

To: Merrie Najimy, Max Page, Jim Sacks, MTA
From: Echo Cove Research & Consulting
Date: August 11, 2020
Re: MTA Voter Pandemic Study

This memorandum presents key findings from a survey of 600 Massachusetts voters. Respondents completed the questionnaire online between July 24 and July 29, 2020. The sample reflects the demographic profile of voters, and therefore the findings can be extrapolated to all the voters in the state with a maximum margin of error of +/- 4%. The purpose of the survey was to probe voters' attitudes toward public education in light of the coronavirus pandemic.

Overview

The main finding of the study is this: Voters — parents and non-parents of K-12 students alike — have grave reservations about opening school buildings right away this fall. They fear that if schools resume in-person learning as normally scheduled, students and teachers/educators will catch and spread the coronavirus to family members and beyond into Massachusetts communities. This fear leads a vast majority to oppose reopening the buildings on schedule. Instead, they prefer a flexible approach, including a remote start, that can be adapted as conditions change. This view is held by both parents and non-parents. It should also be noted that coronavirus cases have begun to rise in Massachusetts since this survey was conducted. Therefore, fears of spreading the virus, and opposition to opening school buildings, may be even greater now than the summary conveyed in this memorandum.

Key Findings

1. An overwhelming majority of voters — both parents and non-parents of public school students — are deeply concerned that children and teachers/educators will catch and spread the virus if school buildings reopen with in-person classes in the late summer or early fall. Parents fear that their children will catch and spread the virus to their families, many of whom have members who are over 60.

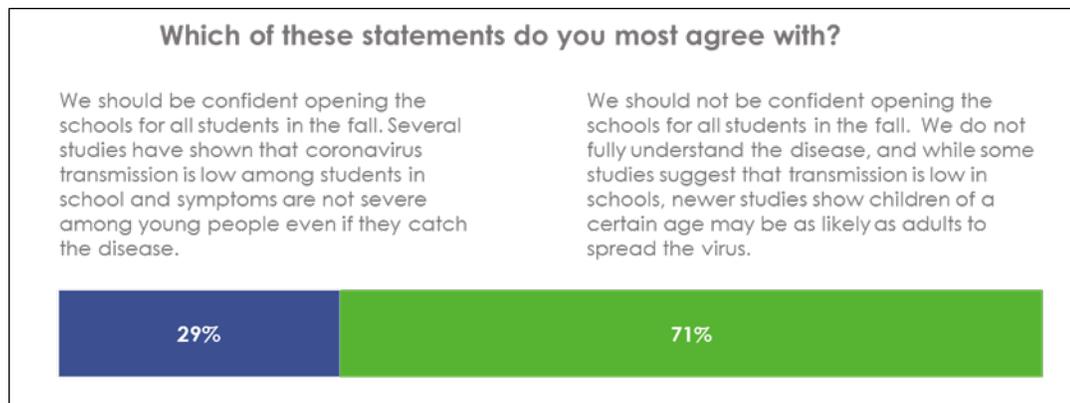
- Nine out of every ten parents (89%) are at least somewhat concerned that their children will catch COVID-19 if schools reopen in the weeks ahead. Indeed, 62% are “very” or “extremely” concerned. Parents are equally concerned that the virus will spread to other family members. Note that 64% of parents have family members over 60, and 28% of them visit these older family members on a regular basis.
- Fear of school-driven contagion extends to non-parents, with 86% at least somewhat concerned that school children will catch and spread the virus, including 69% who are “very” or “extremely” concerned.

- Non-parents are even more fearful of teachers/educators catching and spreading the virus, with 89% at least somewhat concerned and 72% “very” or “extremely” concerned.
- Voters are also very afraid of contagion if the state's colleges and universities open in the fall. Ninety percent of college student parents are at least somewhat concerned that their child will catch and spread the virus; 91% of those without children in college express the same fear.

Please note that numbers such as these are highly unusual in polling. One almost never sees a near consensus on a supposedly controversial public policy issue.

2. This overwhelming fear of contagion leads seven out of every ten voters to feel that we should not be confident about opening the schools for students in the late summer or early fall because of the prevalence of COVID-19.

- Respondents were presented with two opposing statements:
 - We should be confident opening the schools for all students in the fall. Several studies have shown that coronavirus transmission is low among students in school and symptoms are not severe among young people even if they catch the disease.*
 - We should not be confident opening the schools for all students in the fall. We do not fully understand the disease, and while some studies suggest that transmission is low in schools, newer studies show children of a certain age may be as likely as adults to spread the virus.*
- Seven out of every ten voters (71%) agree with the statement that we should not be confident opening the schools, while the remaining 29% believe that we should be confident opening schools.



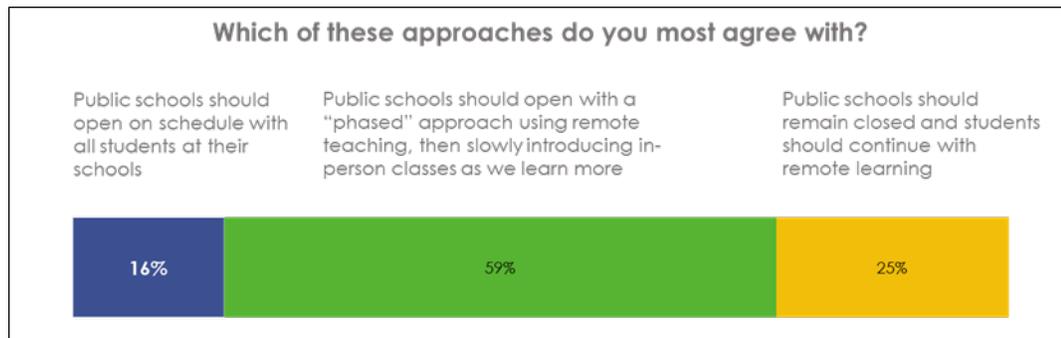
3. Given fears of contagion and the strong belief that we should not be confident opening the schools, it is not surprising that voters strongly favor taking an approach other than opening schools on their normal schedule during the pandemic.

- When presented with statements reflecting both sides of the school opening debate, 88% support flexible opening plans, including 42% who “strongly” support this approach. Opinions were expressed after reading these opposing statements:

*Have **all students return to school on schedule**, which would require relaxing safety guidelines such as reducing social distancing from 6 to 3 feet and not having children below grade 2 wear masks. This would let parents return to work and allow students to get back on track with their education.*

*Have a **flexible approach in which remote learning is improved and applied in the beginning of the school year**. Then, some students are moved back into schools if coronavirus cases remain low and as health and safety standards are put in place.*

- More than eight out of every ten voters (84%) believe that schools should not open on schedule, while only 16% think that schools should indeed open for all students as planned.



4. Given the pandemic, seven out of every ten voters believe that the state should be flexible with both the school day and the MCAS requirements.

- Seven out of every ten voters (69%) believe that:

We should be flexible with the 180 school-day requirement, because even though students might get fewer school days, educators need the flexibility to respond to keep students safe as conditions change.

Only 31% believe that:

We should still require 180 days of schooling, because now it is more important than ever to ensure that students get a full year of education.

- Again, almost seven out of every ten voters (68%) believe that:

MCAS testing should be stopped for 1 year. *The curriculum needs to be adapted to be flexible and take into account issues around trauma and the pandemic. We should not use valuable learning time to prepare for the test, which will just show that students are behind.*

Only 32% believe that:

MCAS testing should be continued. *It ensures that all students in the state achieve a minimally adequate level of knowledge before graduating. This is especially important now, given the disruptions and loss of learning caused by the pandemic.*

5. The Black Lives Matter movement has had a strong impact in Massachusetts. Voters of all races agree that the public schools should include a curriculum addressing issues raised by the movement, including systemic racism.

- Two-thirds (65%) of all voters (including 62% of all K-12 parents) think that our public schools should include a curriculum addressing issues raised by the Black Lives Matter movement, including systemic racism.
- Note that this curriculum is supported by 62% of white voters and virtually all black voters (97%).