

# **Beyond the Classroom: Public Opinion on the Future of K–12 Education**

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## **Has K–12 education in New York gotten better or worse? It depends on who you ask**

According to a new Siena College poll conducted by student researchers, New Yorkers are nearly evenly split: 41 percent say the quality of education has improved since they were in school, while 36 percent believe it has declined. Yet, in a seeming contradiction, nearly six in ten respondents rated their local school district as doing either an excellent or good job. The survey, which polled 801 residents statewide, provides a complex snapshot of public sentiment, revealing deep divisions over school safety, curriculum, and what schools should ultimately prepare students for.

## **Community Research in Action**

As part of our preparation, we engaged with a panel of guest speakers representing a range of professional roles in K–12 education, from district administrators to classroom teachers and curriculum developers. Their perspectives deepened our understanding of the systemic challenges and cultural shifts occurring in schools today. For instance, panelists spoke about post-pandemic declines in student social-emotional skills, disparities in resources between urban and suburban districts, and the impact of digital technology on communication and learning. Several also emphasized the importance of inclusivity, representation, and community engagement in education. These conversations helped ground our survey design in real-world concerns and guided the kinds of questions we posed to the public. This article is the product of a semester-long community-based research project conducted by students in Siena College's COMD 210: Community Research and Consulting course. Centered on the topic of K–12 education, the class partnered with the Siena College Research Institute to develop and administer a statewide public opinion survey. Guided by readings on educational equity, school policy, and media framing, and informed by conversations with guest speakers, including educators and policy professionals, students designed questions, analyzed data, and interpreted the results. The goal was to better understand how New Yorkers view the current state and future direction of K–12 education.

## **Improvement or Decline? The Public is Split**

When it comes to the overall direction of K–12 education in New York, public opinion is far from unanimous. The Siena College survey found that 41 percent of respondents believe the quality of education has improved over time, while 36 percent say it has declined. Another 23 percent think it has stayed the same. Yet, despite this divide, 59 percent of New Yorkers rate their local school district as doing either an excellent or good job. This contrast suggests a deeper

disconnect between how residents view education on a local versus statewide scale. Experts often attribute this phenomenon to what is known as proximity bias, the idea that people tend to evaluate familiar institutions more favorably. It may also reflect the uneven distribution of resources across districts or the influence of broader national debates on public perception. Whatever the cause, the data paints a picture of a public that trusts its neighborhood schools but remains uncertain about the system as a whole.

### **Public Schools Falling Behind in the Court of Public Opinion**

When asked which type of school delivers a higher quality education, nearly half of New Yorkers, 48 percent, say private schools come out on top. In contrast, only 20 percent believe public schools offer a higher-quality education, while 32 percent say the type of school makes no difference. This perception gap has implications that extend beyond the classroom walls. For one, it may shape how voters respond to calls for increased public school funding, especially in areas where private institutions are more prominent or perceived as elite alternatives. While the survey did not deeply explore demographic breakdowns, past studies suggest that education level, political affiliation, and whether someone has children in school can influence these views. Regardless of background, the data raises a critical question: if the public views private schools as superior, how can public education regain trust and the financial investment that accompanies it?

### **Life Skills Take the Lead**

When asked what schools should prioritize most, a majority of New Yorkers, 56 percent, point to life skills such as financial literacy, communication, and critical thinking. Just 29 percent believe the primary goal of K–12 education should be preparing students for success in higher education, while only 8 percent say schools should focus on trades and vocational paths. These results suggest that many residents are reevaluating what constitutes educational success in today's world. Rather than emphasizing standardized tests or college admissions, the public seems to be shifting toward a more holistic view, one that values real-world preparedness over academic milestones. Even as policymakers and districts promote STEM and college-readiness programs, the survey underscores a growing desire for schools to equip students with tools to manage everyday challenges and thrive beyond the classroom.

### **Modern Risks, New Rules**

Concerns over school safety and the role of technology in the classroom are shaping public opinion in powerful ways. Sixty percent of New Yorkers say today's schools are less safe than they were 50 years ago, a view held especially by older residents. In response to evolving risks, many support stricter school policies. A full 68 percent of respondents favor banning cell phone use throughout the entire school day, while 51 percent support prohibiting the use of artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT for schoolwork. When it comes to school safety measures, 52

percent believe allowing teachers to carry concealed firearms would be bad for K–12 schools. At the same time, there is overwhelming support for investing in student well-being, with most New Yorkers backing the use of school funding to hire more counselors and social workers. These findings reflect a delicate balancing act between safety and personal freedom, innovation and regulation, as schools adapt to new challenges both inside and outside the classroom.

### **Trust in Local Control Over Curriculum**

As debates over curriculum and book bans continue across the country, most New Yorkers favor keeping those decisions close to home. Sixty percent of respondents say local school boards, not state officials or parents, should determine which books are included in K–12 classrooms. This strong preference for local control highlights the public’s desire for decision-making that reflects community values rather than top-down mandates. "When it comes to deciding what is taught in schools, most New Yorkers are saying they trust their school boards more than state governments or vocal minority groups," said Travis Brodbeck, Associate Director of Data Management at the Siena College Research Institute. This sentiment signals growing resistance to politically charged interference in education and underscores the importance of community representation in shaping what students read and learn.

### **Listening to the Public, Learning from the Data**

The results of this survey reflect a public that is both hopeful and cautious about the state of K–12 education. While New Yorkers generally support their local schools, concerns persist about safety, priorities, and the increasing influence of technology. As students in the COMD 210 course, we sought to address these concerns through a hands-on, collaborative research approach. In doing so, we not only captured key trends in public opinion but also gained real-world experience in civic engagement, survey design, and data analysis. Most importantly, we learned how research can inform dialogue and how dialogue can drive change.