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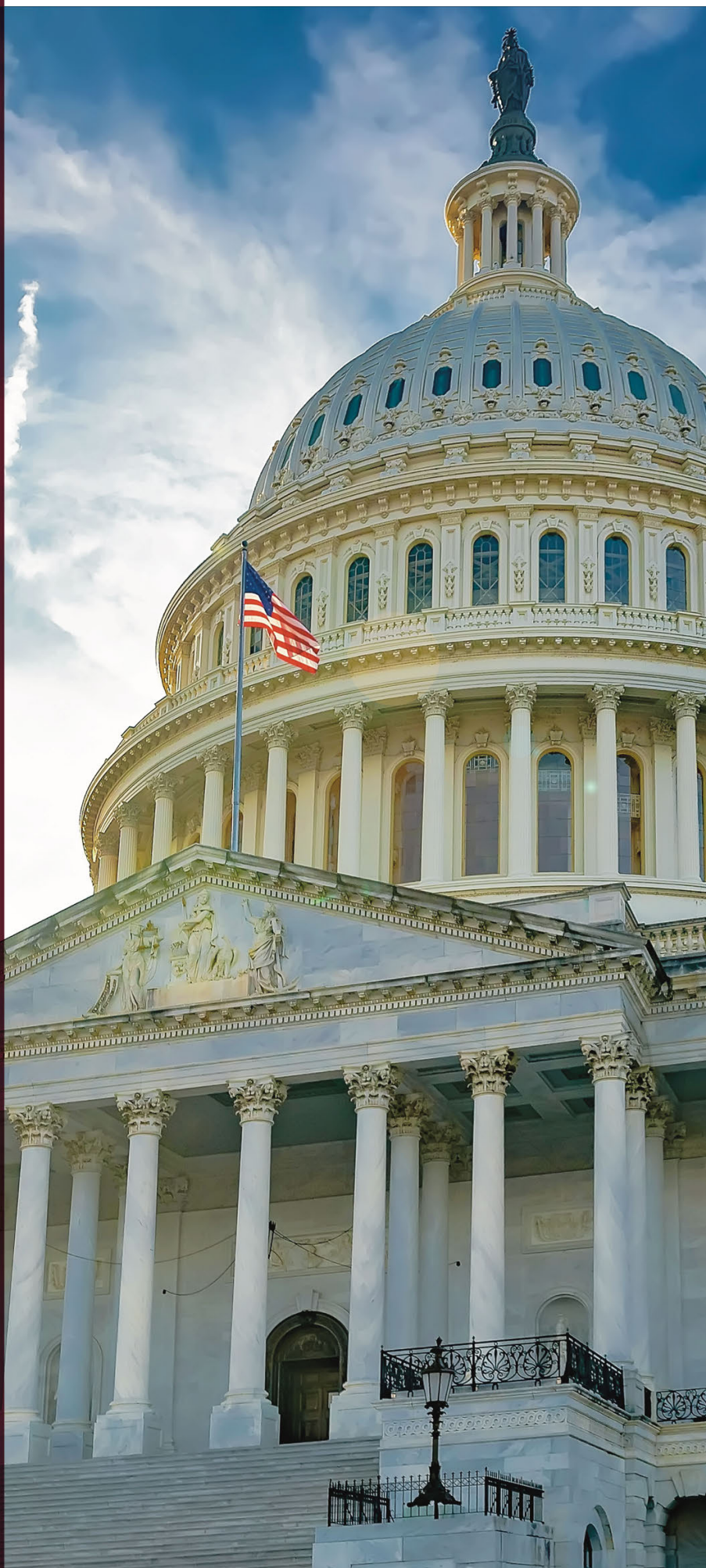


**INSTITUTE FOR
GOVERNANCE & CIVICS**
FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

IGC POLL REPORT

Who Do Americans Trust to Make Educational Decisions on Behalf of Children?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Institute for Governance and Civics (IGC) asked a nationally representative sample of 1,447 U.S. adults in September 2025 how much they trust each of six key educational actors to make educational decisions on behalf of children. The findings reveal that Americans distinguish sharply among different decision-makers, that Democrats and Republicans view things quite differently, and that who people trust has important implications for education policy preferences. Key findings include:

- **Parents and public school teachers receive the highest levels of trust**

Parents (78%) are the most trusted educational decision-makers, followed by public school teachers (75%). Trust declines substantially for public school administrators (58%), teachers' unions (56%), respondents' home-state departments of education (52%), and the U.S. Department of Education (40%).

- **Republicans and Democrats differ in which educational actors they trust most**

Republicans place their greatest trust in parents (86%), whereas Democrats place greater trust in public school teachers (88% vs. 72% for parents). Trust in administrators, teachers' unions, and government education agencies is even more polarized along partisan lines.

- **Trust in state departments of education depends partly on political context**

Democrats and Republicans express greater trust in their home-state departments of education when their own party controls the governor's office, suggesting that evaluations of these agencies depend in part on the surrounding political environment.

- **Educational trust is not a single attitude**

Rather than reflecting one broad tendency to trust or distrust educational decision-makers, Americans' views cluster into distinct forms of educational trust, including trust in parents, trust in educational professionals and organizations, and

trust in government education agencies.

- **Different forms of educational trust are associated with different attitudes toward school choice.** People who trust educational professionals and organizations support school choice less, whereas people who trust parents and government educational agencies are more likely to support it.

INTRODUCTION

Who do Americans trust to make K-12 decisions on behalf of children? Should these decisions rest with parents, classroom teachers, school administrators, teachers' unions, or government education agencies? These questions lie at the center of many of today's most important education debates, including parental rights, school governance, curriculum, and school choice. Yet despite their importance, surprisingly little nationally representative data exist on whom Americans trust to make educational decisions.¹

Using data from a nationally representative survey of 1,447 U.S. adults in September 2025, we examine whether Americans trust six key educational actors: parents, public school teachers, public school administrators, teachers' unions, respondents' home-state departments of education, and the U.S. Department of Education. We then examine how levels of trust in these actors differ across political groups, whether they reflect different forms of educational trust, and how those different forms relate to support for school choice.

We find that Americans distinguish sharply among decision-makers. Parents and public school teachers receive the highest levels of public trust, while educational organizations and government education agencies receive less. Trust also varies substantially across political groups and, in some cases, depends on the broader political context in which educational decisions are made. Finally, the findings demonstrate that educational trust is not a single attitude but instead comprises several distinct dimensions with different implications for education policy preferences.

¹ To our knowledge, there is relatively little nationally representative polling on Americans' trust in educational decision-makers. A notable exception is EdChoice's 2024 Schooling in America survey, which asked respondents how much they trust various actors—including parents, teachers, state departments of education, and the U.S. Department of Education—to make good decisions about K-12 education. Our survey differs in both question wording and the specific actors included, particularly by including public school administrators and teachers' unions. See: EdChoice. Schooling in America: 2024 Survey Findings. Indianapolis, IN: EdChoice, 2024. Available at: <https://www.edchoice.org/new-polling-reveals-parents-trust-teachers-on-education-more-than-state-legislatures/>

AMERICANS EXPRESS THE GREATEST TRUST IN PARENTS AND TEACHERS TO MAKE EDUCATIONAL DECISIONS

Figure 1 shows that the public trusts parents and public school teachers but are more skeptical of other educational actors.² Seventy-eight percent of Americans report trusting parents either completely (27%) or somewhat (51%) to make educational decisions on behalf of children, while 75% express trust in public school teachers, including 20% who trust them completely. Just 17% and 21% distrust parents and teachers, respectively.

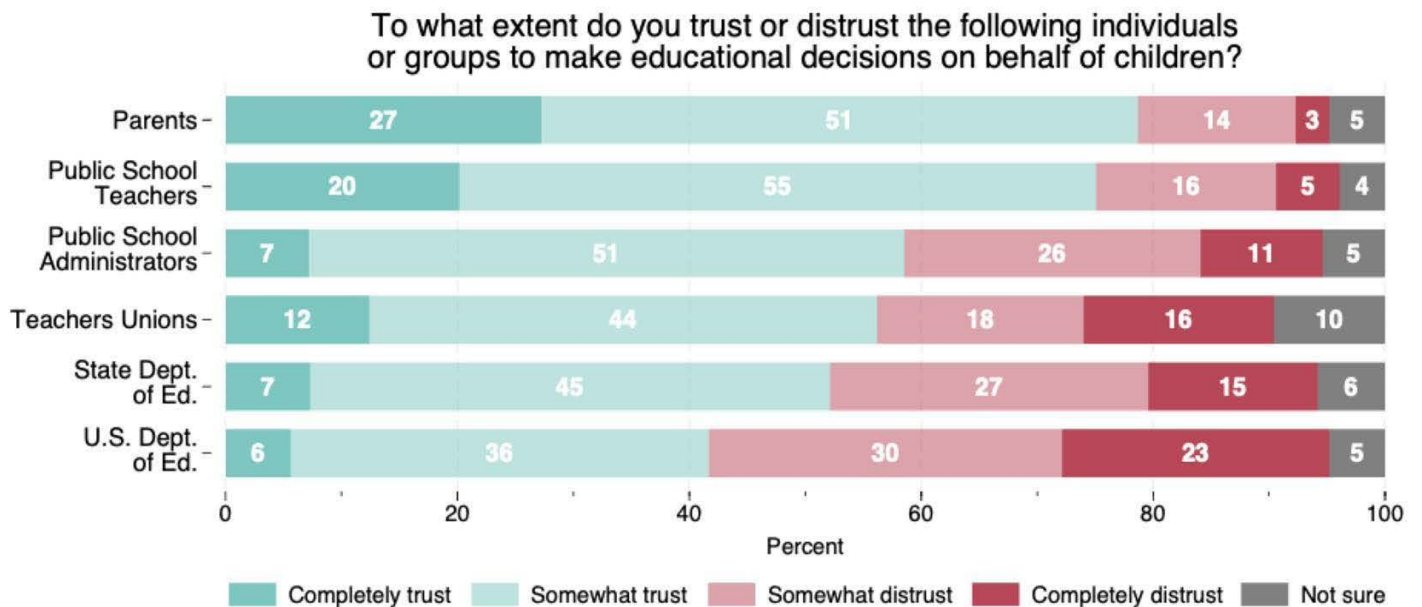


Figure 1. Trust in Individuals and Institutions to Make Educational Decisions

Note: Estimates are weighted to represent the U.S. adult population (n = 1,447). Bars show the distribution of responses for each item.

Trust drops sharply for the remaining educational actors. Fifty-eight percent of respondents trust public school administrators, while 37% express distrust. Teachers' unions receive a narrower majority of support, with 56% expressing trust compared to 34% expressing distrust.

Government education agencies receive the lowest levels of public trust. Just 52% of respondents trust their state's department of education, while 42% express distrust. Trust falls even further for the U.S. Department of Education, which only 42% of Americans trust, compared with 53% who distrust it.

Overall, Americans trust parents and public school teachers far more than the organizations and agencies who administer public education.

² Florida residents exhibit a pattern of educational trust remarkably similar to that observed nationally. Parents and public school teachers remain the most trusted educational decision-makers, while government education agencies receive the lowest levels of trust (see Appendix Figure A1).

PARTISANS (LARGELY) AGREE ON PARENTS BUT DIFFER SHARPLY OVER EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Figure 2 shows that Democrats and Republicans differ significantly in how much they trust each of the six educational actors. The size of these differences varies considerably as well.

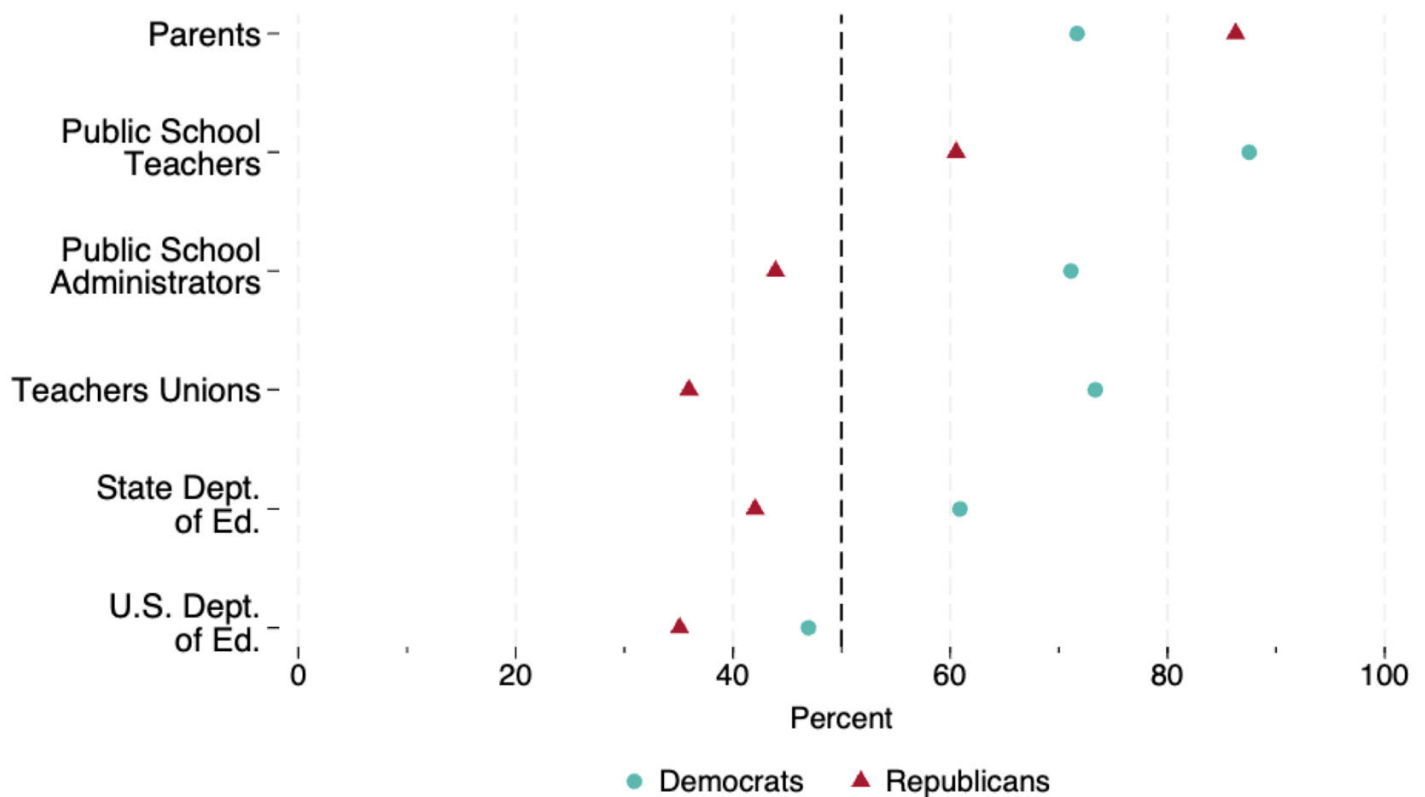


Figure 2. Trust in Individuals and Institutions to Make Educational Decisions, by Party

Note: Estimates are weighted to represent the U.S. adult population (n = 1,415, including 695 Democrats, and 720 Republicans). Markers represent the percentage of respondents in each partisan group who selected either “Completely trust” or “Somewhat trust.”

Republicans place their greatest trust in parents (86%), with public school teachers ranking second (61%). Democrats show the opposite pattern. They place greater trust in public school teachers (88%) than in parents (72%).

Partisan differences are even larger for other educational actors. The largest gap—a difference of 37 percentage points—concerns teachers’ unions. Seventy-three percent of Democrats trust teachers’ unions, compared with just 36% of Republicans. Public school administrators are also substantially more trusted by Democrats than Republicans (71% vs. 44%).

Trust in government education agencies is lower in both parties. Nevertheless, Democrats remain more likely than Republicans to trust both their state’s department of education (61% vs. 42%) and the U.S. Department of Education (47% vs. 35%).

Taken together, these findings show that Democrats and Republicans differ not only in how much they trust educational decision-makers, but also in whom they trust most.

PARTISANS PLACE GREATER TRUST IN STATE EDUCATION DEPARTMENTS WHEN THEIR PARTY HOLDS THE GOVERNOR'S

The previous section showed that Democrats are 19 percentage points more likely than Republicans to trust their home state's department of education. That difference, however, masks an important pattern. Trust depends not only on respondents' own partisanship, but also on which party controls their state's executive branch.

Figure 3 shows the estimated probability of trusting one's state department of education among Democrats and Republicans living under Democratic and Republican governors.³ Estimates control for ideology, age, sex, race and ethnicity, household income, education, metropolitan status, homeownership, and census region.

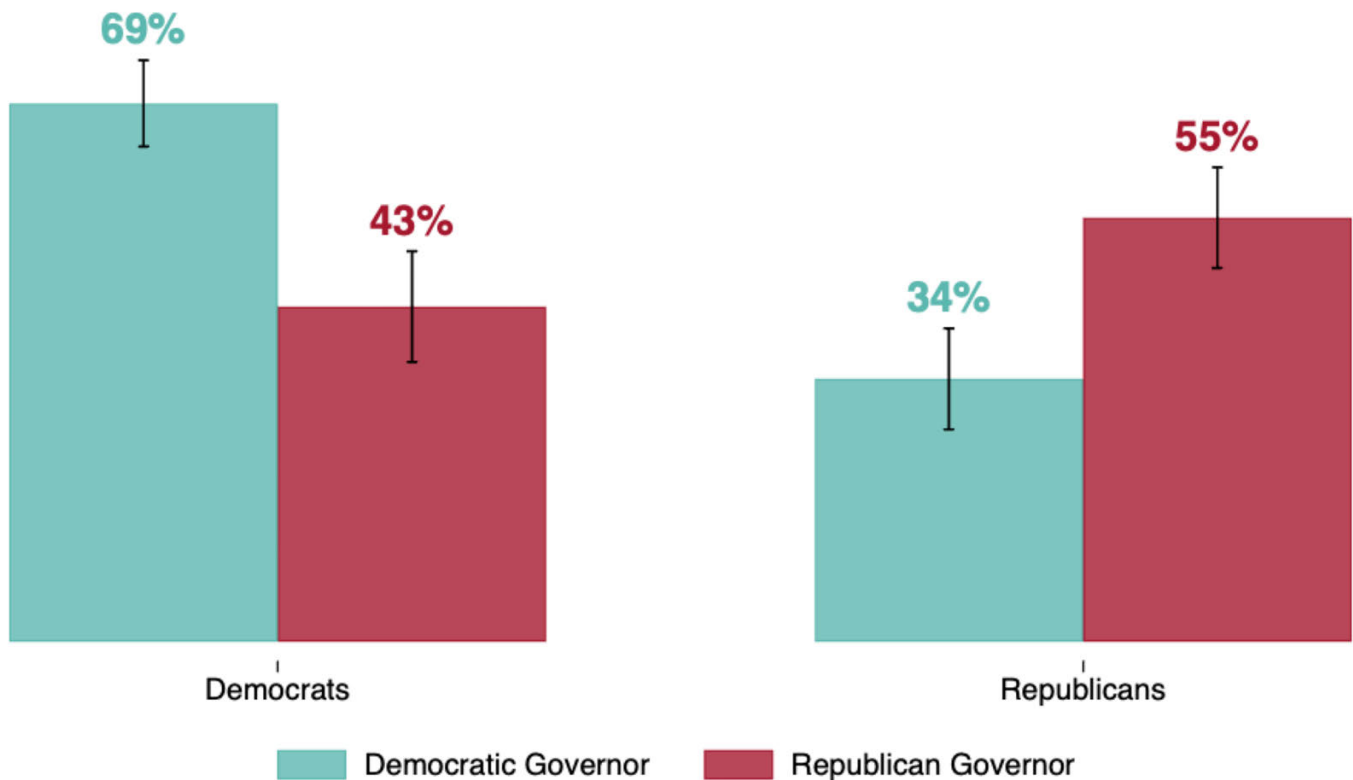


Figure 2. Trust in Individuals and Institutions to Make Educational Decisions, by Party

Note: Estimates are weighted to represent the U.S. adult population (n = 1,417). Bars represent the estimated probability that Democrats and Republicans report trusting their home state department of education (combining "Completely trust" and "Somewhat trust"), by party of the governor. Estimates adjust for age, sex, race/ethnicity, household income, educational attainment, metropolitan status, homeownership, and political ideology. Standard errors are clustered by state. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.



A clear partisan pattern emerges. Democrats are 26 percentage points more likely to trust their state's department of education when they live under a Democratic governor (69%) than when they live under a Republican governor (43%). Republicans exhibit the opposite pattern. Fifty-five percent of Republicans living under Republican governors trust their state's department of education, compared to just 34% of Republicans living under Democratic governors.

Overall, these findings suggest that trust in state departments of education reflects more than general attitudes toward education or government. Instead, Democrats and Republicans appear to evaluate these agencies partly in light of who governs their state. Members of both parties express substantially greater trust when their own party controls the governor's office.⁴

DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF EDUCATIONAL TRUST ARE LINKED TO ATTITUDES TOWARD SCHOOL CHOICE

Up to this point, we have examined trust in six educational actors individually. An important question is whether these trust judgments all reflect a general tendency to trust or distrust educational actors equally. For example, does trusting one educational actor generally mean trusting the others as well? Or do certain educational actors tend to cluster together?

Figure 4, which summarizes the statistical analyses that compare the different trust levels, suggests the latter. Trust in public school teachers, administrators, and teachers' unions forms one group with shared trust characteristics, which we refer to as trust in **educational professionals and organizations**. Trust in the U.S. and state departments of education forms a second trust group, trust in **government education agencies**. Trust in parents, by contrast, stands largely apart from both.

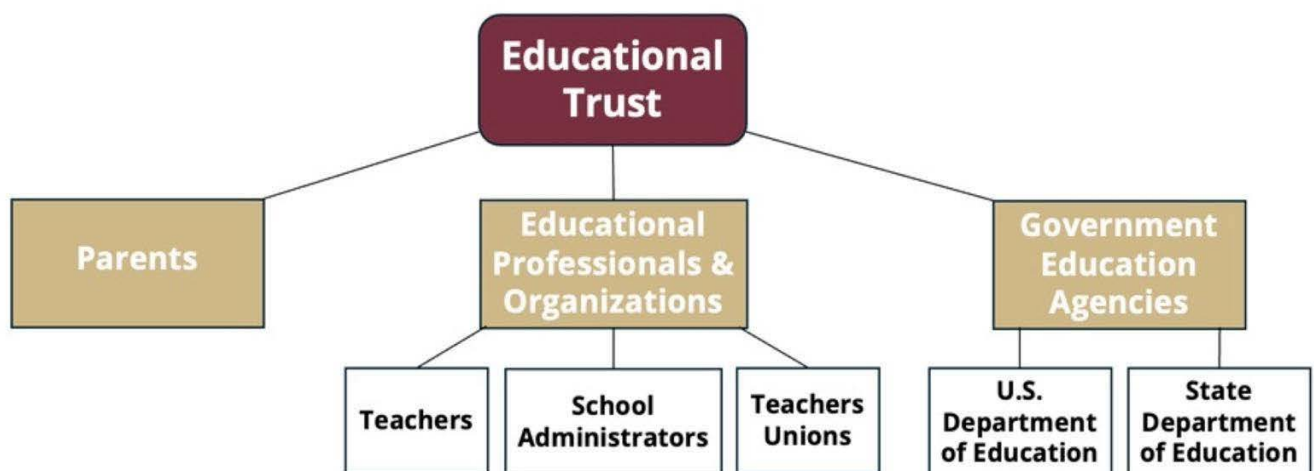


Figure 4. The Multidimensional Structure of Educational Trust

Note: Figure summarizes the latent structure identified through exploratory factor analysis. Public school teachers (.80), administrators (.62), and teachers' unions (.60) loaded on a common Educational Professionals & Organizations factor. The U.S. Department of Education (.67) and respondents' home-state department of education (.60) loaded on a separate Government Education Agencies factor. Indexes averaging responses to the items within each factor were moderately correlated ($r = .54$), indicating that they capture related—but distinct—dimensions of educational trust. Trust in parents did not load strongly on either factor and was only weakly correlated with trust in educational professionals ($r = .01$) and trust in government education agencies ($r = .15$), suggesting that trust in parents represents a largely independent dimension of educational trust.

These distinctions matter because different dimensions of educational trust are associated with different attitudes toward school choice. To examine these relationships, we estimate how trust in educational professionals and organizations, trust in government education agencies, and trust in parents are each associated with support for school choice. School choice is measured using a two-item index that averages respondents' support for expanding publicly funded school choice programs and their agreement that public education funding should follow students to the school they attend, whether public or private.

Figure 5 shows that the different dimensions of educational trust are associated with school choice in markedly different ways. Holding trust in government education agencies and parents constant, respondents who place greater trust in educational professionals and organizations are substantially less supportive of school choice. On the seven-point school choice index (1 = least supportive; 7 = most supportive), predicted support declines from 5.92 among respondents who completely distrust educational professionals to 4.48 among those who completely trust them—a difference of 1.43 points.

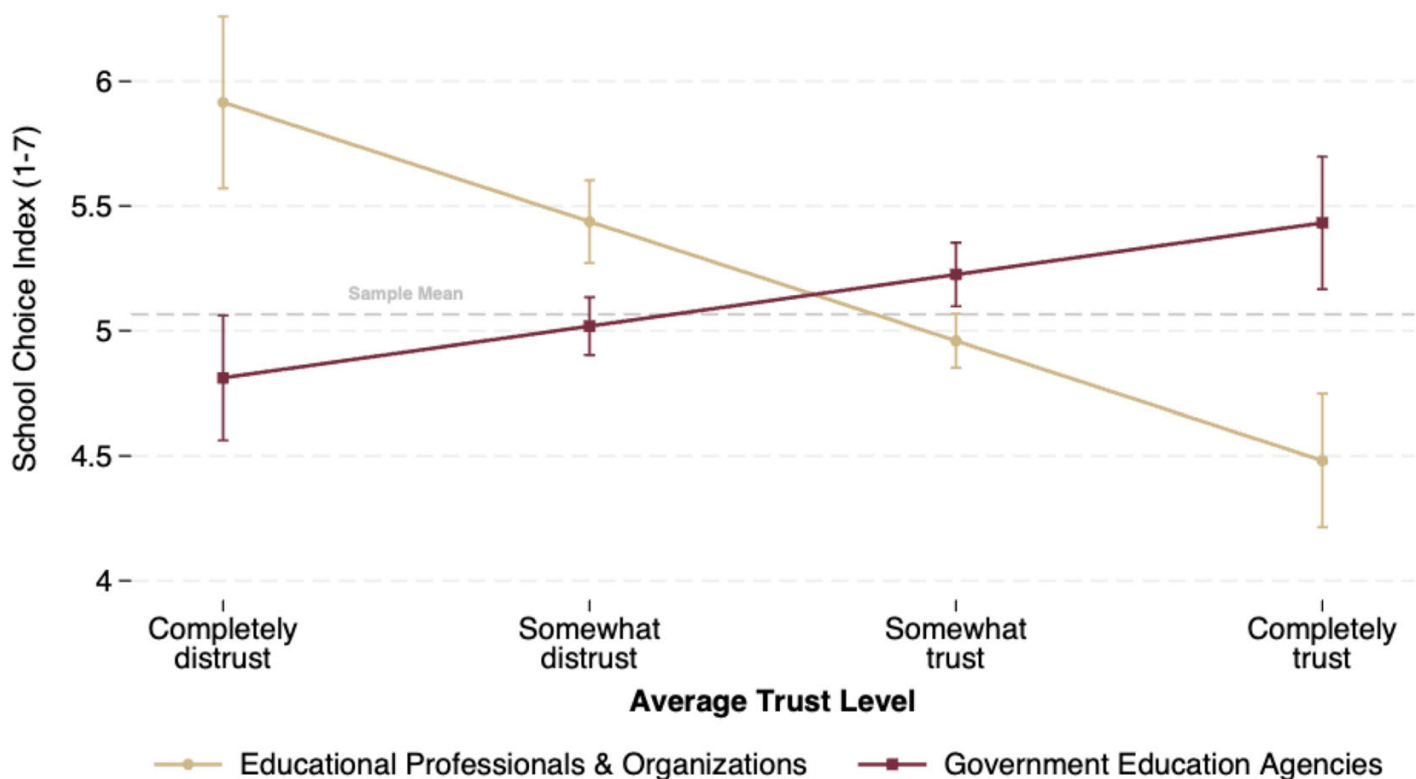


Figure 5. Predicted Support for School Choice, by Educational Trust Dimension

Note: Estimates are weighted to represent the U.S. adult population ($n = 1,248$). Markers represent the predicted average score on a seven-point school choice index across levels of trust in educational professionals and organizations and government education agencies. The school choice index averages responses to two seven-point items: (1) support for expanding publicly funded school choice programs, such as charter schools, private school scholarships, and open enrollment (1 = Strongly oppose, 7 = Strongly support); and (2) agreement that public education funding should follow students to whichever school they attend, whether public or private (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). Trust indexes were constructed by averaging the survey items that loaded on each factor shown in Figure 4. Estimates adjust for trust in parents, age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, educational attainment, metropolitan status, homeownership, parent status, political ideology, party affiliation, and census region. Respondents with missing covariate data or who answered “Not sure” to a majority of the trust items ($n = 199$) were excluded from the analysis. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.

The relationship reverses for government education agencies.⁵ Holding trust in educational professionals and organizations and parents constant, respondents who express greater trust in government education agencies are more supportive of school choice. Predicted support rises from 4.81 among respondents who completely distrust government education agencies to 5.43 among those who completely trust them.

Finally, although measured with a single item, trust in parents exhibits the strongest association with school choice attitudes. Holding the two trust indexes constant, predicted support rises from 3.86 among respondents who completely distrust parents to 5.54 among those who completely trust them (Appendix Figure A3).

Collectively, these findings underscore the importance of distinguishing between different forms of educational trust. Each form of educational trust relates differently—in some cases in opposite directions—to support for school choice.

CONCLUSION

To our knowledge, this report presents one of the first nationally representative studies examining whom Americans trust to make educational decisions. The findings show that although parents and public school teachers are broadly trusted, with majorities in both parties trusting these actors, trust in the remaining educational actors is substantially more polarized along partisan lines. In some cases, such as trust in respondents' home-state department of education, these partisan differences also depend on political context: both Democrats and Republicans express greater trust when their party controls the governor's office.

More broadly, the findings demonstrate that educational trust is not a single attitude. Rather than reflecting a general tendency to trust or distrust educational decision-makers, trust in parents, educational professionals and organizations, and government education agencies represents distinct dimensions of educational trust. Although related, these dimensions capture distinct ways Americans think about educational authority. Because many education policy debates center on how decision-making authority should be allocated among parents, educational professionals, and government agencies, understanding these distinctions is important for interpreting public opinion on education policy.

3 We conducted comparable analyses for each of the other educational actors. The reciprocal pattern shown in Figure 3 was most pronounced for respondents' home-state departments of education. Trust in public school teachers also varied by governor party, but primarily among Republicans, who expressed greater trust under Republican governors. Differences for parents, public school administrators, teachers' unions, and the U.S. Department of Education were smaller or inconsistent. See Appendix Figure A2.

4 Results are substantively similar when the partisan environment is measured using the 2024 Trump-Harris margin in respondents' states rather than the party of the governor. We present the governor-based specification because it more directly captures the political leadership responsible for state education policy and provides a better fit to the data.

5 When analyzed in isolation, trust in government education agencies is not significantly associated with school choice support. The positive association shown in Figure 5 emerges after accounting for trust in educational professionals and organizations, reflecting the moderate correlation between these two dimensions of educational trust ($r = .54$).



POLL INFORMATION

This study was conducted online between September 17–23, 2025 by Social Science Research Services (SSRS) using a Probability-Based Opinion Panel. The sample consisted of 1,447 respondents age 18 or older, including an oversample of 252 Florida residents. The margin of error for total respondents is +/-2.9% at the 95% confidence level. Weighted demographic characteristics of the survey group are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Descriptive Characteristics by Survey Sample

Category	Main Survey Sample	Florida Sample
Sex		
Male	49%	49%
Female	51%	51%
Age		
18 to 29	20%	18%
30 to 49	34%	30%
50 to 64	24%	25%
65 or older	23%	27%
Race/Ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic White	61%	55%
Black	12%	14%
Hispanic	18%	26%
Asian	6%	3%
Other	2%	2%
Income		
Less than \$50,000	40%	39%
\$50,000-\$74,999	15%	18%
\$75,000-\$99,999	14%	16%
\$100,000 and over	30%	27%
Education		
Less than HS	9%	8%
HS Graduate	29%	31%
Some college	26%	26%
BA Degree	20%	20%
Postgrad / Prof. Degree	16%	16%
Parent Status		
K-12 Parent	26%	17%
Not a K-12 Parent	74%	83%
Stated Party		
Democrat	30%	28%
Republican	27%	28%
Independent / Something else	43%	44%
Political Ideology		
Liberal	26%	21%
Moderate	43%	49%
Conservative	31%	30%
N	1,447	252



APPENDIX A: SUPPLEMENTARY FIGURES

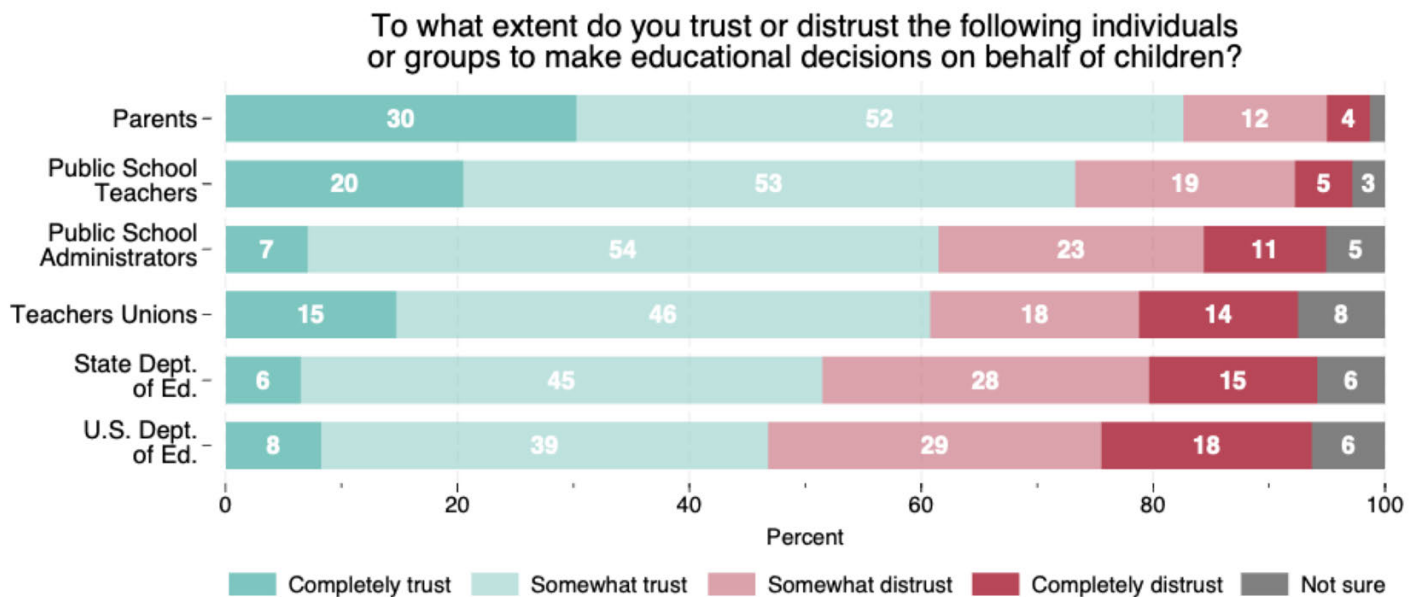
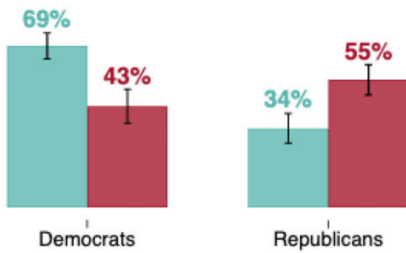


Figure A1. Trust in Individuals and Institutions to Make Educational Decisions Among Florida Residents

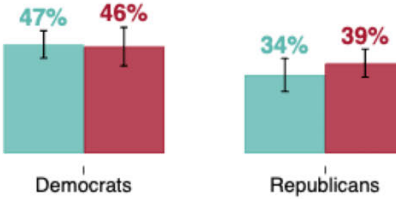
Note: Estimates are weighted to represent the Florida adult population (n = 252). Bars show the distribution of responses for each item.



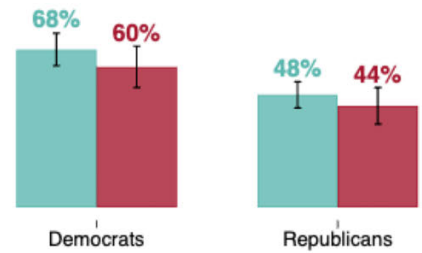
State Department of Education



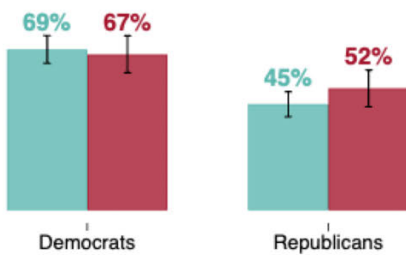
U.S. Department of Education



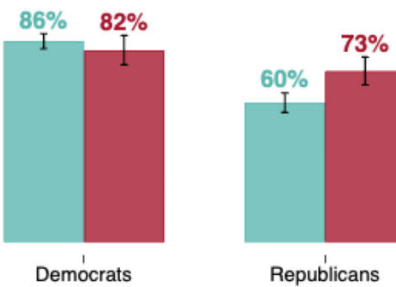
Teachers Unions



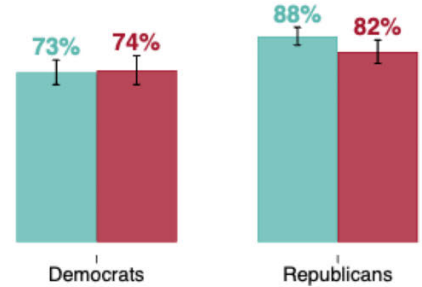
Public School Administrators



Public School Teachers



Parents



■ Democratic Governor ■ Republican Governor

Figure A2. Public Trust in Six Educational Actors, by Party Affiliation and Party of the Governor

Note: Estimates are weighted to represent the U.S. adult population (n = 1,417). Bars represent the estimated probability that Democrats and Republicans report trusting each listed educational actor (combining “Completely trust” and “Somewhat trust”), by party of the governor. Estimates adjust for age, sex, race/ethnicity, household income, educational attainment, metropolitan status, homeownership, and political ideology. Standard errors are clustered by state. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

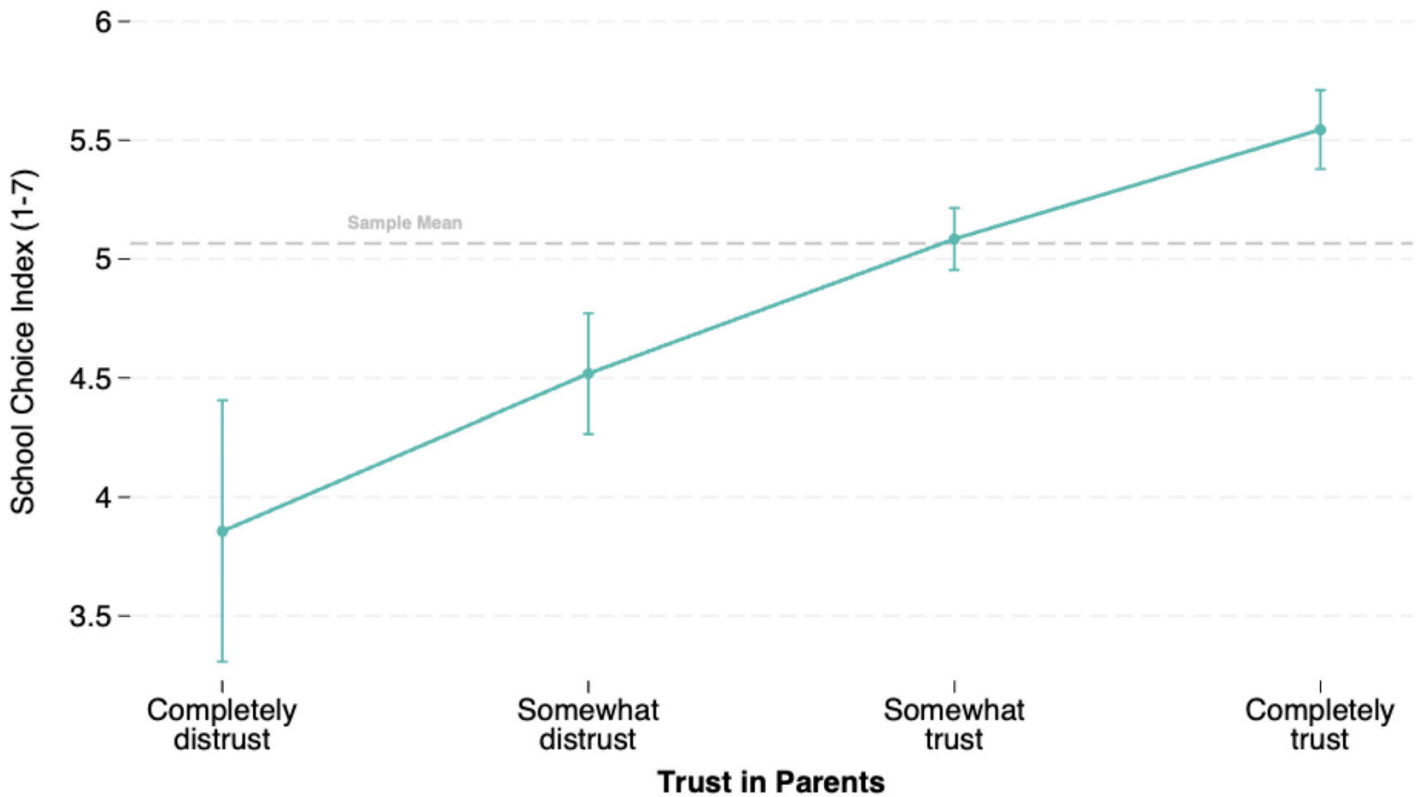


Figure A3. Predicted Support for School Choice, by Level of Trust in Parents

Note: Estimates are weighted to represent the U.S. adult population (n = 1,248). Markers represent the predicted average score on a seven-point school choice index across levels of trust in parents. The school choice index averages responses to two seven-point items: (1) support for expanding publicly funded school choice programs, such as charter schools, private school scholarships, and open enrollment (1 = Strongly oppose, 7 = Strongly support); and (2) agreement that public education funding should follow students to whichever school they attend, whether public or private (1 = Strongly disagree, 7 = Strongly agree). Estimates adjust for average trust in educational professionals and organizations, average trust in government education agencies, age, gender, race/ethnicity, household income, educational attainment, metropolitan status, homeownership, parent status, political ideology, party affiliation, and census region. Respondents with missing covariate data or who answered "Not sure" to a majority of the trust items (n = 199) were excluded from the analysis. Error bars indicate 95% confidence intervals.