

# Partisan divides over K-12 education in 8 charts

*di Jenn Hatfield*

K-12 education is shaping up to be a key issue in the 2024 election cycle. Several prominent Republican leaders, including GOP presidential candidates, have sought to [limit discussion of gender identity and race in schools](#), while the Biden administration has called for [expanded protections for transgender students](#). The coronavirus pandemic also brought out [partisan divides on many issues related to K-12 schools](#).

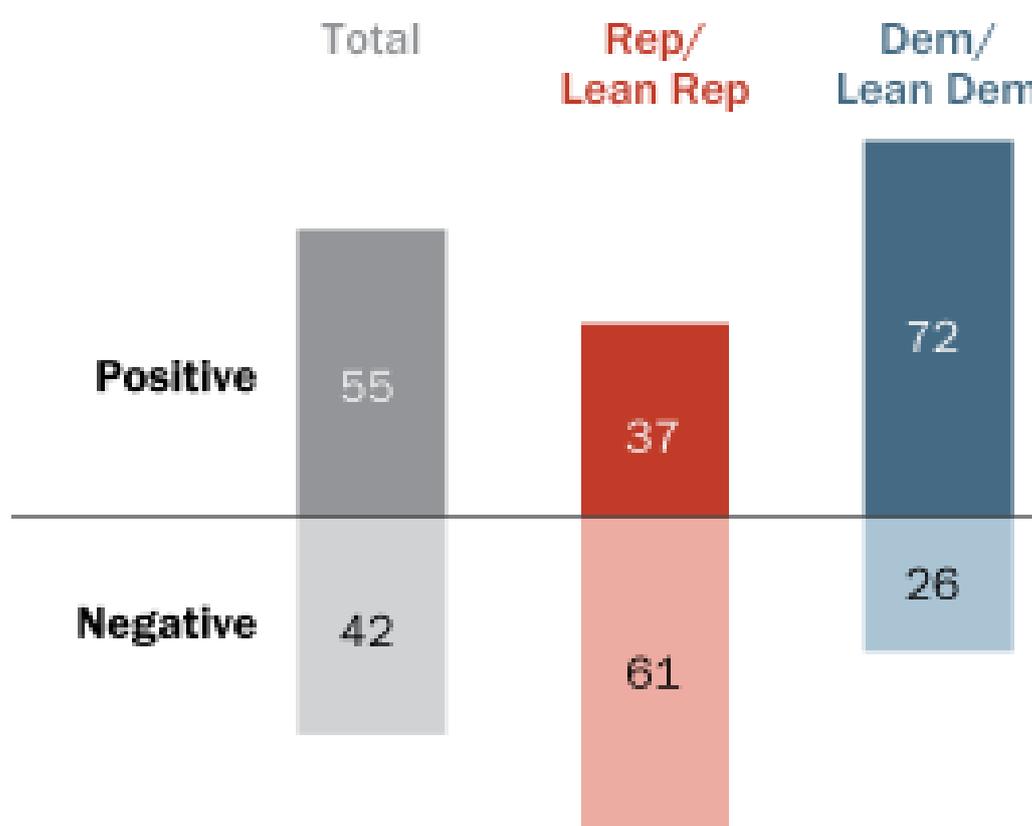
Today, the public is sharply divided along partisan lines on topics ranging from what should be taught in schools to how much influence parents should have over the curriculum. Here are eight charts that highlight partisan differences over K-12 education, based on recent surveys by Pew Research Center and external data.

**Most Democrats say [K-12 schools are having a positive effect on the country](#), but a majority of Republicans say schools are having a negative effect**, according to a Pew Research Center survey from October 2022. About seven-in-ten Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents (72%) said K-12 public schools were having a positive effect on the way things were going in the United States. About six-in-ten Republicans and GOP leaners (61%) said K-12 schools were having a *negative* effect.

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## In 2022, a majority of Republicans said K-12 schools were having a negative effect on the U.S.

*% saying K-12 public schools have a \_\_\_ effect on the way things are going in the country*



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Oct. 10-16, 2022.

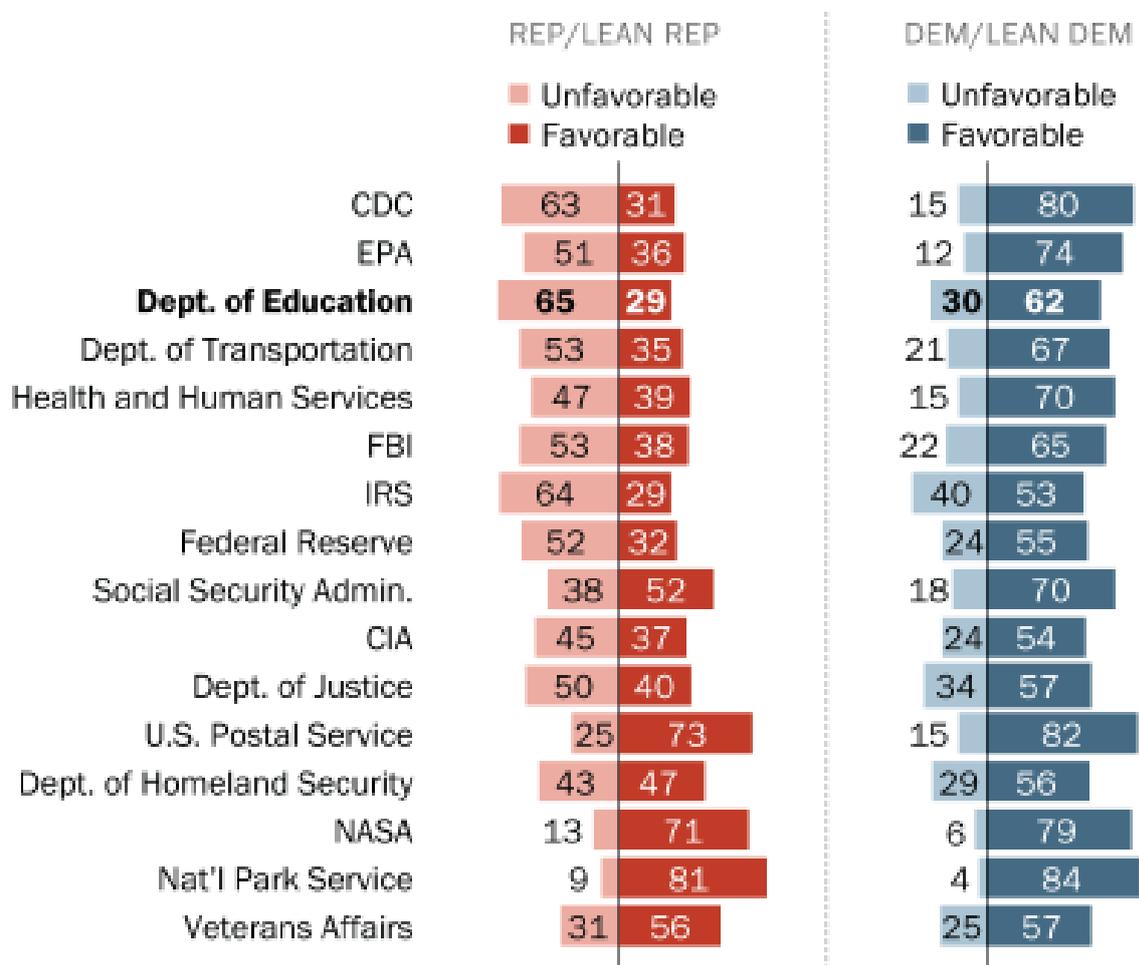
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**About six-in-ten Democrats (62%) have a [favorable opinion of the U.S. Department of Education](#), while a similar share of Republicans (65%) see it negatively**, according to a March 2023 survey by the Center. Democrats and Republicans were more divided over the Department of Education than most of the other 15 federal departments and agencies the Center asked about.

## Wide partisan differences in views of most federal agencies, including the Department of Education

*% who have a(n) \_\_\_ opinion of each federal agency*



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted March 13-19, 2023.

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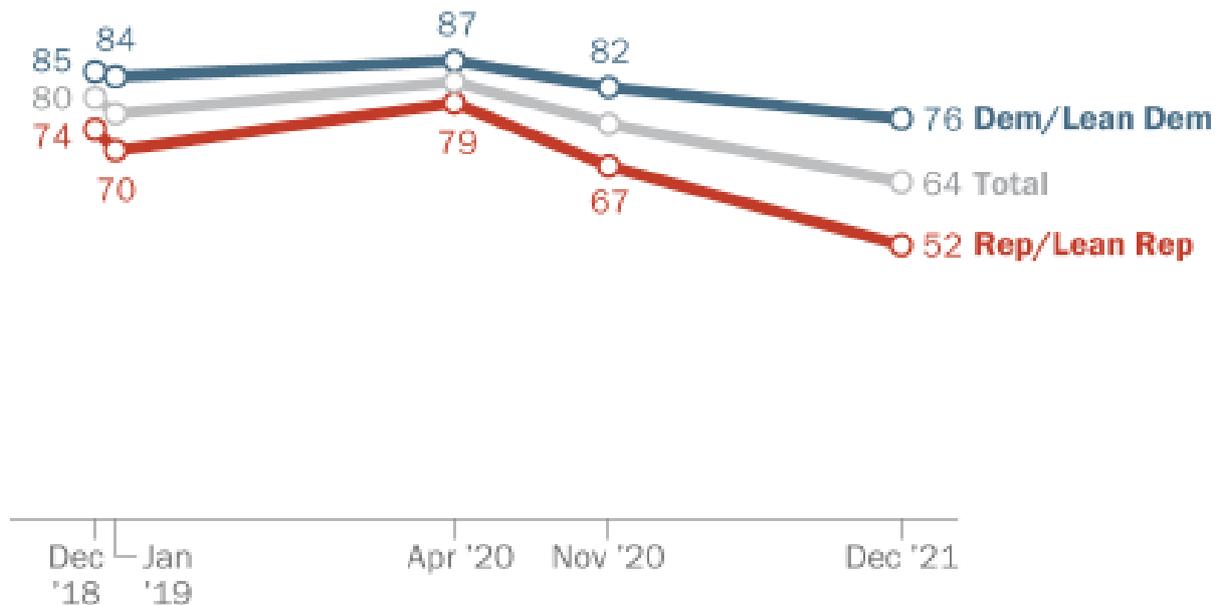
In May 2023, after the survey was conducted, [Republican lawmakers scrutinized the Department of Education's priorities](#) during a House Committee on Education and the Workforce hearing. The lawmakers pressed U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona on topics including transgender students' participation in sports and how race-related concepts are taught in schools, while Democratic lawmakers focused on school shootings.

**[Partisan opinions of K-12 principals](#) have become more divided.** In a December 2021 Center survey, about three-quarters of Democrats (76%) expressed a great deal or fair amount of confidence in K-12 principals to act in the best interests of the public. A much smaller share of Republicans (52%) said the same. And nearly half of Republicans (47%) had not too much or no confidence at all in principals, compared with about a quarter of Democrats (24%).

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## Confidence in K-12 principals in 2021 was lower than before the pandemic – especially among Republicans

% who have a *great deal or fair amount* of confidence in K-12 public school principals to act in the best interests of the public



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted Nov. 30-Dec. 12, 2021.

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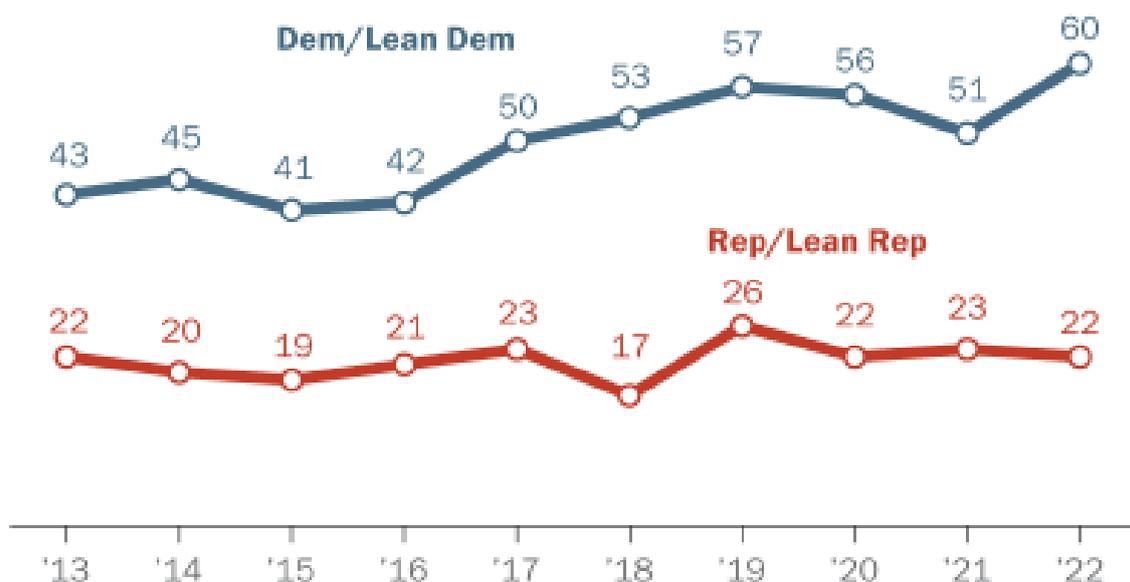
This divide grew between April 2020 and December 2021. While confidence in K-12 principals declined significantly among people in both parties during that span, it fell by 27 percentage points among Republicans, compared with an 11-point decline among Democrats.

**Democrats are much more likely than Republicans to say teachers’ unions are having a positive effect on schools.** In a [May 2022 survey by Education Next](#), 60% of Democrats said this, compared with 22% of Republicans. Meanwhile, 53% of Republicans and 17% of Democrats said that teachers’ unions were having a *negative* effect on schools. (In this survey, too, Democrats and Republicans include independents who lean toward each party.)

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## From 2013 to 2022, Republicans' and Democrats' views of teachers' unions grew further apart

*% saying that teachers' unions have a generally positive effect on K-12 schools*



Source: Education Next survey of U.S. adults conducted May 2-30, 2022.

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The 38-point difference between Democrats and Republicans on this question was the widest since Education Next first asked it in 2013. However, the gap has exceeded 30 points in four of the last five years for which data is available.

**Republican and Democratic parents differ over how much influence they think governments, school boards and others should have on what K-12 schools teach.** About half of Republican parents of K-12 students (52%) said in a [fall 2022 Center survey](#) that the federal government has too much influence on what their local public schools are teaching, compared with two-in-ten Democratic parents. Republican K-12 parents were also significantly more likely than their Democratic counterparts to say their state government (41% vs. 28%) and their local school board (30% vs. 17%) have too much influence.

## Republican and Democratic parents have different views of the influence government, school boards, parents and teachers have on what schools teach

% of parents of K-12 students saying each of the following has \_\_\_ influence when it comes to what public K-12 schools in their area are teaching

### The federal government

	Too much	Not enough	About right	Not sure
Rep/Lean Rep	52	8	17	22
Dem/Lean Dem	20	15	35	29

### Their state government

	Too much	Not enough	About right	Not sure
Rep/Lean Rep	41	10	26	23
Dem/Lean Dem	28	12	33	26

### The local school board

	Too much	Not enough	About right	Not sure
Rep/Lean Rep	30	11	35	24
Dem/Lean Dem	17	15	41	26

### Parents

	Too much	Not enough	About right	Not sure
Rep/Lean Rep	8	44	35	14
Dem/Lean Dem	19	23	39	19

### Teachers

	Too much	Not enough	About right	Not sure
Rep/Lean Rep	16	25	44	15
Dem/Lean Dem	9	35	42	14

Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown. The survey also asked about principals and students. Only items with a difference of 10 percentage points or more in shares of Republican and Democratic parents saying "too much" or "not enough" shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. parents conducted Sept. 20-Oct. 2, 2022.

"Parents Differ Sharply by Party Over What Their K-12 Children Should Learn in School"

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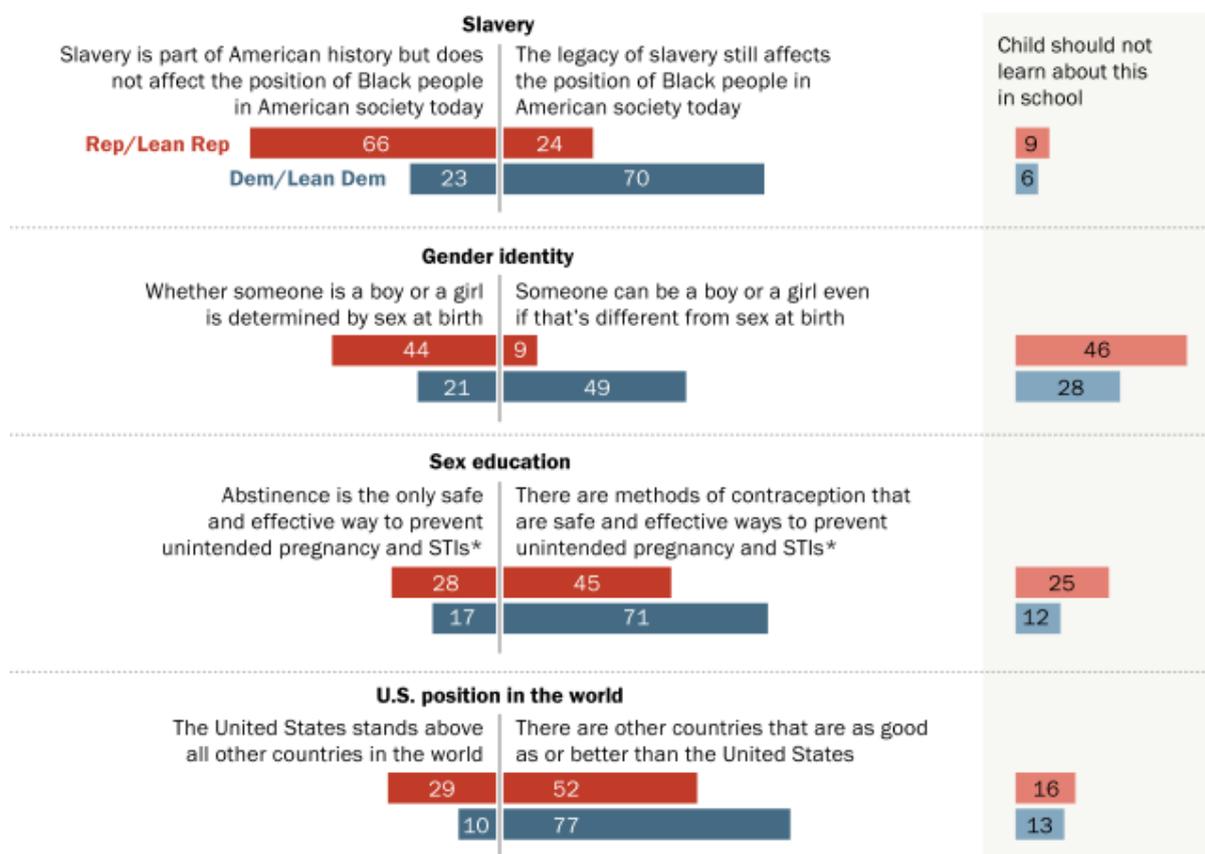
On the other hand, more than four-in-ten Republican parents (44%) said parents themselves don't have *enough* influence on what their local K-12 schools teach, compared with roughly a quarter of Democratic parents (23%). A larger share of Democratic parents – about a third (35%) – said teachers don't have enough influence on what their local schools teach, compared with a quarter of Republican parents who held this view.

**Republican and Democratic parents don't agree on what their children should learn in school about certain**

**topics.** Take slavery, for example: While about nine-in-ten parents of K-12 students overall agreed in the fall 2022 survey that their children should learn about it in school, they differed by party over the specifics. About two-thirds of Republican K-12 parents said they would prefer that their children learn that slavery is part of American history but does not affect the position of Black people in American society today. On the other hand, 70% of Democratic parents said they would prefer for their children to learn that the legacy of slavery still affects the position of Black people in American society today.

## In 2022, Republican and Democratic parents had different views of what their children should learn about certain topics in school

% of parents of K-12 students saying they would prefer their children learn in school that ...



\* Question asked about "sexually transmitted infections (STIs)."

Note: Based on parents whose children are not homeschooled. Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. parents conducted Sept. 20-Oct. 2, 2022.

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Parents are also divided along partisan lines on the topics of gender identity, sex education and America's position relative to other countries. Notably, 46% of Republican K-12 parents said their children should not learn about gender identity at all in school, compared with 28% of Democratic parents. Those shares were much larger than the shares of Republican and Democratic parents who said that their children should not learn about the other two topics in school.

**Many Republican parents [see a place for religion in public schools](#), whereas a majority of Democratic parents do not.** About six-in-ten Republican parents of K-12 students (59%) said in the same survey that public school teachers should be allowed to lead students in Christian prayers, including 29% who said this should be the case even if prayers from other

religions are not offered. In contrast, 63% of Democratic parents said that public school teachers should not be allowed to lead students in any type of prayers.

## Nearly six-in-ten Republican parents, but fewer Democratic parents, said in 2022 that public school teachers should be allowed to lead students in prayer

*% of parents of K-12 students saying teachers in public schools ...*



Note: Share of respondents who didn't offer an answer not shown.

Source: Survey of U.S. parents conducted Sept. 20-Oct. 2, 2022.

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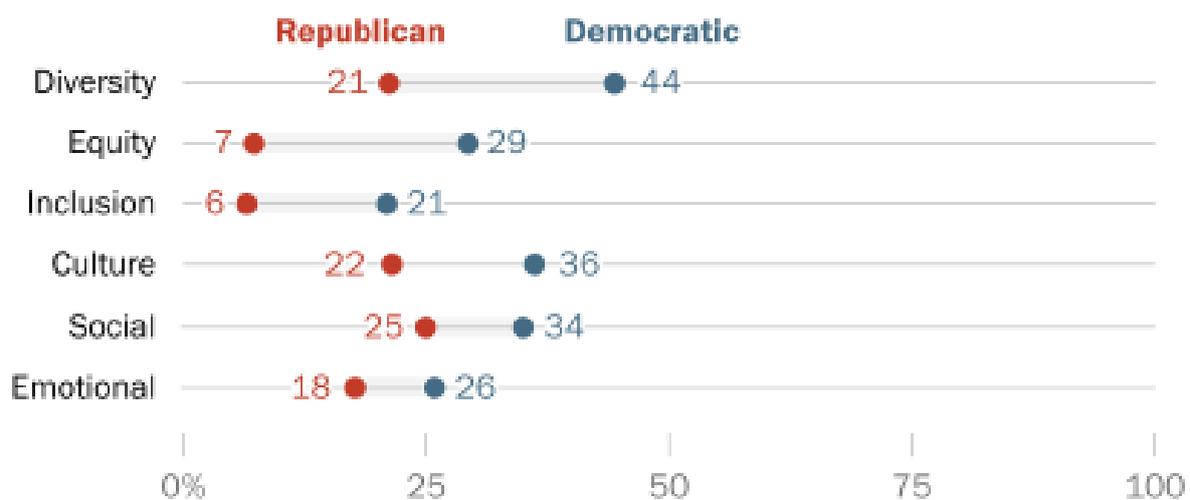
In June 2022, before the Center conducted the survey, [the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a football coach](#) at a public high school who had prayed with players at midfield after games. More recently, [Texas lawmakers introduced several bills](#) in the 2023 legislative session that would expand the role of religion in K-12 public schools in the state. Those proposals included a bill that would require the Ten Commandments to be displayed in every classroom, a bill that would allow schools to replace guidance counselors with chaplains, and a bill that would allow districts to mandate time during the school day for staff and students to pray and study religious materials.

## Mentions of diversity, social-emotional learning and related topics in school mission statements are more common in Democratic areas than in Republican areas.

K-12 mission statements from public schools in areas where the majority of residents voted Democratic in the 2020 general election are at least twice as likely as those in Republican-voting areas to include the words “diversity,” “equity” or “inclusion,” according to [an April 2023 Pew Research Center analysis](#).

## Public school district mission statements in Democratic-voting areas mention some terms more than those in areas that voted Republican in 2020

*% of public school district mission statements that use the term \_\_\_\_, by 2020 vote share in district*



Note: Terms listed are the most distinctive on the topic of diversity, equity and inclusion, as identified using pointwise mutual information. Terms include common variations (for instance, “equity” also includes words such as “inequity” and “equitable”). School district vote share categories are defined based on 2020 general election majority vote share of populations living in school district areas and are calculated using Redistricting Data Hub data.

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1,314 mission statements from U.S. public school district websites, collected Nov. 16-18, 2022.

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Also, about a third of mission statements in Democratic-voting areas (34%) use the word “social,” compared with a quarter of those in Republican-voting areas, and a similar gap exists for the word “emotional.” Like diversity, equity and inclusion, social-emotional learning is a contentious issue between Democrats and Republicans, even though [most K-12 parents think it’s important for their children’s schools to teach these skills](#). Supporters argue that social-emotional learning helps address mental health needs and student well-being, but some critics [consider it emotional manipulation](#) and want it banned.

In contrast, there are broad similarities in school mission statements outside of these hot-button topics. Similar shares of mission statements in Democratic and Republican areas mention students’ future readiness, parent and community involvement, and providing a safe and healthy educational environment for students.