

## **Vanderbilt Child Health Poll:**

### **Education, bullying, mental health, school gun violence top list of parental concerns for their children: poll**

— by *Tamarra McElroy and Jake Lowary*

The latest results from an annual [poll](#) of Tennessee parents from the [Vanderbilt Center for Child Health Policy](#) again show education and school quality is the leading concern parents have for their children for the third consecutive year.

Statewide, parents listed their top concerns as 1) education and school quality (43%), 2) bullying, including cyberbullying (39%), 3) mental health and suicide (37%), 4) school gun violence (32%), and 5) drug and alcohol use (23%).

When asked about specific education concerns, nearly half of parents polled reported the educational progress (51%) and emotional well-being of their child as a concern (50%). “My child’s safety” in school ranked in the top three of parental concerns (38%) but was notably higher among Black parents (48%) and parents in West Tennessee (42%).

Researchers said the concerns about schooling, learning progress and social and emotional well-being were likely intertwined.

“Social isolation and shifts in educational practices during the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to greater mental health struggles among children, with some estimates suggesting that rates of depression and anxiety symptoms nearly doubled,” said Carolyn Heinrich, PhD, University Distinguished Professor of Public Policy and Education at Vanderbilt, and member of the Center. “Schools across Tennessee are reporting higher levels of anxiety and depression among students and are responding by strengthening both academic and mental health supports available on campus for students.”

When asked, most Tennessee parents (75%) opposed the proposal being explored by Tennessee lawmakers to reject \$1.9 billion in federal funds for education. Parents were also asked their opinion on banning spanking in schools as has been proposed in the legislature, and fewer than 30% opposed the ban.

In the wake of the shooting at the Covenant School in 2023, Tennessee explored a range of potential policy solutions in a special session. The poll explored parental feelings about firearm safety in schools, and their opinions on the August special session.

Nearly 40% of parents said their children were worried about school shootings, and two-thirds of parents said they have had conversations with their children about firearm violence at school. Less than 20% said they felt schools were safer than the previous year, and a similar number considered changing schools or homeschooling due to safety concerns.

“Exposure to firearm violence, directly or indirectly, can impact a child’s health in many ways causing physical, emotional and social symptoms. It can disrupt their sleep or hinder their ability to learn,” said Kelsey Gastineau, MD, MPH, a pediatric hospitalist at Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt. “When 2 of 5 parents in

Tennessee are worried about school shootings, it's a signal that they don't have access to the safe, supportive environments they need to thrive."

Despite their concerns, most parents (68%) did not follow the special legislative session on public safety following the Covenant School shooting. While few expressed satisfaction with the result of the special session (22%), far more (45%) noted they did not know enough about the session to express an opinion.

"The issues concerning Tennessee parents about their children have remained remarkably stable in the last couple of years, with school quality, cyberbullying, mental health, school gun violence and drug and alcohol use topping the list," said Stephen W. Patrick, MD, MPH, holder of the Dr. William R. Long Directorship in Children's Health Policy. "School gun violence continues to be on the mind of parents less than a year after the shooting at The Covenant School, only 17% believe schools are safer this year compared to last year, and 1 in 5 considered changing schools due to safety concerns. These numbers are striking and provide insight into what Tennessee parents are thinking."

These data are the first in a series of releases on other analyses of the polling. Over the next few months, the Vanderbilt Center for Child Health Policy will report additional data collected on several other issues impacting Tennessee parents and children, including mental health, food insecurity and insurance status.

The poll is conducted annually and covers a range of issues including health insurance status, behavioral health and food security. The research was funded in part by a grant from the Boedecker Foundation.

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## By The Numbers

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The Vanderbilt Child Health poll surveyed 1,025 Tennessee parents with children under 18 years old from October 25 - November 22, 2023. 82% of all parents surveyed are registered voters. All reported percentages have survey weights applied, so their interpretation can be broadened to all parents in Tennessee. For example, "38.9% of Tennessee parents list bullying, including cyberbullying as one of their top 3 concerns for their child."

All summaries are listed as weighted proportions of Tennessee parents  $\pm$  Standard of Error

### *Top 5 Concerns*

Education and school quality	42.8% $\pm 2.3$
Bullying, including cyberbullying	38.9% $\pm 2.3$
Child mental health and suicide	36.6% $\pm 2.2$
School gun violence	31.5% $\pm 2.1$
Drug and alcohol use	23.1% $\pm 2.0$

### **Education**

#### *Top 3 Education Concerns*

My child's learning and educational progress	50.8% $\pm 2.3$
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My child's social and emotional well being	50.1% ± 2.3
My child's feelings of safety at school	37.9% ± 2.2

**Corporal Punishment**

*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: The use of physical discipline like spanking/paddling should be banned in Tennessee public schools for all students.*

**Overall Agreeance**

Strongly disagree / Disagree	28.1% ± 2.1
Neither Agree nor Disagree	19.9% ± 1.7
Agree / Strongly Agree	52.0% ± 2.3

**Federal Funding**

*Tennessee lawmakers are exploring rejecting \$1.9 billion in federal funding that supports public schools, especially those public schools that serve students from districts with lower incomes. Lawmakers in favor of rejecting federal dollars cite concerns that the funding comes with requirements on Tennessee schools that the state must meet. Lawmakers who want to keep the federal dollars are concerned that losing this funding will negatively impact Tennessee public schools and public school students.*

*Do you favor or oppose Tennessee rejecting federal funds for public school education?*

<b>Favor</b>	<b>Oppose</b>
24.7% ± 1.9	75.3% ± 1.9

**Firearms & School Safety**

49% of parents surveyed are firearm owners.

*In the past year, have you and your child(ren) had a conversation about school shootings?*

<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
65.8% ± 2.4	34.2% ± 2.4

*How worried is/are your child(ren) about school shootings?*

<b>Very unworried/Unworried</b>	<b>Neither worried nor unworried</b>	<b>Worried/Very worried</b>
28.6% ± 2.5	32.9% ± 2.3	38.5% ± 2.4

*Since the last school year (2022-2023), have you considered changing your child(ren)'s school or beginning homeschooling due to concerns about school safety?*

<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
21.3% ± 2.0	78.7% ± 2.0

*How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Compared to last year, schools are safer from gun violence.*

**Overall Agreeance**

Strongly disagree / Disagree	37.4% ± 2.2
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Neither Agree nor Disagree	45.4% ± 2.3
Agree / Strongly Agree	17.2% ± 1.6

*In the last school year, did your child's school go into lockdown?*

<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
33.4% ± 2.1	66.6% ± 2.1

*In August 2023, the Tennessee governor called for a special legislative session on public safety following the Covenant School shooting in Nashville, Tennessee. Did you follow the legislative session?*

<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
32.5% ± 2.1	67.5% ± 2.1

*How satisfied you were with the results of the session?*

	Don't know enough about the session	Very dissatisfied / Dissatisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Satisfied / Very satisfied
All parents surveyed	44.6% ± 2.3	13.5% ± 1.6	20.3% ± 1.6	21.6% ± 1.8
Parents who followed the session	5.1% ± 1.7	32.4% ± 3.8	23.9% ± 3.0	38.6% ± 3.8

#### *School Safety Perceptions*

**Parents surveyed were asked how much they agreed with statements that began with "Schools are safer if..." The percentages shown are the percentage of parents surveyed that either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements (results similar to last year).**

<b>Schools are safer if...</b>	
Active shooter drills are conducted routinely	69.0% ± 2.1
Teachers are armed	37.3% ± 2.2
There are one or more school resource officers/law enforcement officers who work in the school	80.8% ± 1.8
Guns are not allowed on school property	55.5% ± 2.3
Students, staff, and visitors have to go through a metal detector prior to entering	67.4% ± 2.2
Schools have a single point of entry (in other words, there is only one way to enter the building)	58.7% ± 2.2
The age to purchase a gun is increased to 21	49.9% ± 2.3
Background checks are expanded to be required on all gun sales (including private sales or sales at gun shows	63.9% ± 2.2
The sale of high-capacity magazines is restricted	46.8% ± 2.3
The sale of bump stocks and conversion devices (which allow for more shots to be fire is restricted	46.2% ± 2.3

Families or law enforcement can temporarily restrict a person's access to a gun through civil court order if that person poses a risk to themselves or others	2.1	65.6% ±
Laws are in place to require people to store their guns securely at home to prevent unsupervised access to guns	2.2	59.7% ±

For results by region of Tennessee and by race, visit:  
<https://www.vumc.org/childhealthpolicy/child-health-poll>