



MILLENNIALS AND EDUCATION

WALTON FAMILY
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INTRODUCTION

The millennial generation – roughly defined as those born in the 1980s and 1990s – have now surpassed the Baby Boomers as America’s largest generation.¹ At over 75 million strong and still growing, millennials are dramatically changing the face of America. Having come of age in a world where internet access is widely available and mobile phones the norm, this generation’s expectations about speed, flexibility, and transparency have shaped their views on consumer brands and major institutions.

Millennial views on America’s education system are no exception. Millennials overwhelmingly believe that access to quality education is the most important factor in determining if someone is able to get ahead in life, and believe that access is heavily determined by parental finances or zip code.

Millennials believe that our public school system needs big changes, and think that creativity and flexibility are important to ensuring every student has a school that meets their needs. While they are not deeply familiar with the concepts like school choice or public charter schools, they are open to giving parents greater influence over where their children go to school, and to let public charter schools operate in a different way than traditional public schools. At the same time, they are divided on what the main purpose of public schools should be, and are less open to sweeping changes in how teachers are evaluated and compensated.

Millennials engage with our public school system in a variety of ways. First, most millennials are themselves products of the public school system, and their views are informed by their own experiences as students. Additionally, millennials are now a large portion of the teaching workforce, with most new teachers coming from this generation.² Finally, millennials are having children of their own – the vast majority of babies born today are born to millennial moms - and are beginning to engage with the public school system as parents.³

¹ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/25/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/>

² <http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/195425/managing-millennial-teachers-major-challenge-schools.aspx>

³ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/03/more-than-a-million-millennials-are-becoming-moms-each-year/>

Echelon Insights, supported by the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity (FREOPP) and the Walton Family Foundation, conducted a study of Americans 18-35, with an additional deep dive into the views of both millennial parents and millennial teachers. During the summer of 2017, Echelon conducted a series of focus groups and a national survey to assess how millennials feel the public education system is doing and what they would do to improve it. The findings paint a picture of a generation open to re-thinking many, but not all, aspects of how we run our nation's public schools.

Key findings from the research include:

- + **Millennials get the importance of education** in creating opportunity for people. They believe the ability to access a good education is both a factor of the **student's own effort** and the **financial resources** that a student's family can bring to bear.
- + **Most think their own education was good**, yet at the same time, few think their K-12 experience prepared them for much beyond high school - certainly not for careers or for "real life."
- + **Most think bold reform is needed in our schools** and have an appetite for change that goes beyond simply calling for more funding for schools.
- + **Inadequate funding and ineffective teaching** are what most millennials - including millennial teachers - think is most responsible for schools that aren't working well.
- + **Teacher flexibility and creativity and positive school culture** are credited with causing schools to be considered a "good public school." Flexibility and creativity were also major focus group themes that resonated and represented things people wanted in their schools.
- + **Most think teachers have it tough these days.** Both millennials overall and millennial teachers think that it is harder to be a teacher today than it was twenty years ago, and that the profession has come with more demands and expectations.
- + **Pay-for-performance is not the preferred compensation method.** Most millennials and an overwhelming number of millennial teachers are not fans of throwing out the "step" system. However, where millennial teachers are open to new methods of compensation is in retirement, where they prefer portable accounts over pensions.
- + **School choice is not a well understood concept.** Most understand that students are assigned to a school primarily based on where they live, but when pushed on whether that's how things *should* be, people are uncomfortable or unsure that they think that status quo is right. Once choice is defined, four in ten say they believe their district offers choice to parents.
- + **Once school choice is described, it is fairly well liked.** Half have a positive view after hearing a basic explanation of choice. Teachers believe they understand school choice well and lean against it initially, but once it is defined, become more positive about the concept.
- + **Public charter schools are also not well known or understood by millennials.** However, millennials support giving public charters a lot of flexibility in how they educate students.

QUALITY PUBLIC SCHOOLS AND OPPORTUNITY

Millennials are clear: having access to a quality education is the most important factor in having good opportunity to get ahead in life.

When we ask millennials to tell us what they think are the biggest drivers of ensuring someone has the opportunity to succeed, nearly seven-in-ten (68 percent) identify “having access to a quality education” as one of the most important factors in this regard, far outpacing other options such as “having the right connections and networks” (43 percent) and having access to financial resources (41 percent). This transcends race, gender, education level, and the type of community (rural, urban, or suburban) lived in; across all major demographic categories, access to education tops the list and far outpaces other proposed factors.

But millennials also know that access to a quality education is not a reality for all students in America today. While they are somewhat upbeat about their own time as a student, with two-thirds saying their own education was either “very good” or “good,” a majority also tell us that they think the average American student gets an education that is only “fair” or “poor.” White respondents have the most positive view of their own education (71 percent rate it as “very good” or “good”), while only 59 percent of black respondents say the same. However, both black and white respondents had similar assessments of the quality of education the average American student gets today.

68%

of Millennials identify **“having access to a quality education”** as one of the most important factors to ensure someone has the opportunity to succeed.

"I feel like my high school didn't really set us up to be successful or give us opportunity because, ...when you live in a certain area, certain opportunities or certain programs are not in that school. That lessens your chance to do better things, versus if you're in a school that has all these different programs, and activities, and different things that you can be a part of. It makes your chance higher."

FEMALE, FORMER PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT, ATLANTA

Of course, the idea that people like their own schools but think the education system overall is not doing a good job is not something unique to millennials. The disappointment we found millennials have with the public school system is comparable to what is seen in the broader public; Gallup finds that only nine percent of American adults are “completely satisfied” with the quality of K-12 education in America, and another 34% are only “somewhat satisfied,” while the majority are dissatisfied.⁴ At the same time, Gallup found that 76 percent of K-12 parents were either completely or somewhat satisfied with their child’s own education. Interestingly, in our study, millennial parents were much more upbeat about the quality of education students get today than were non-parents; a majority of parents said that schools today were “good” or “very good,” compared to only one-third of non-parents.

Millennials think access to a quality public education is largely determined by a mix of a student’s own effort and the financial resources of their parents. When given a list of options and asked to choose up to two factors that most determine whether a student has access to a quality education, a plurality choose “the work they are willing to put in” (44 percent) or “the financial resources of their parents” (44 percent). This is followed by “the neighborhood where they live” (33 percent). Notably, while “the work they are willing to put in” is the top factor chosen by respondents without graduate degrees, only 22 percent of millennials with graduate degrees believe personal effort is a main factor, instead pointing first and foremost to the neighborhood where a student lives (62 percent).

Millennials say the top factors that most determine whether a student has access to a quality education are:



the work they are willing to put in



the financial resources of their parents

⁴ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1612/education.aspx>

WHAT MAKES A “QUALITY PUBLIC SCHOOL”?

It is one thing to say you think you got a good education, but it is quite another to define what a “good education” looks like. **And while millennials generally think they received a good education, they are divided on what the concept of a “quality public education” should mean.** While two-thirds of millennials say that they got either a good or very good education, only 39 percent think that they were prepared to succeed in college or post-secondary coursework. Even more troubling, only 22 percent felt they left high school with the ability to succeed in the workforce, and only 20 percent felt they were prepared to navigate life and real-world challenges. Some six-in-ten of those who went on to get a college degree said that their K-12 education had prepared them to succeed in college, but only 21 percent of those who did not pursue college felt they were at least prepared for it had they pursued that path. White millennials are much more likely to report having been prepared for college (44 percent) than black (34 percent) or Hispanic (24 percent) respondents.

When asked what schools *ought* to be doing for students, there is not a clear consensus. Should high schools focus on preparing students for future academic pursuits, or should they focus on real-world lessons and career training? Millennials are divided on this issue. Only half of millennials say that students “should be prepared to navigate adult life and real-world challenges” upon leaving high school, and a similarly slim majority say students “should be prepared to succeed in college or post-secondary courses.” On the question of whether high school should prepare students for college, attitudes vary

widely depending on the education level of the respondent; millennials with college degrees (62 percent) or graduate degrees (81 percent) are much more likely to think high school should prepare students for college, while only 37 percent of those who did not pursue college felt the same.

“We have standardized testing, but does a standardized testing teach you how to balance a checkbook? Does it teach you even how to apply for a home loan? These are all things that you're gonna have to learn at one point in time. Why don't they teach it to you when you're young?”

MALE, FORMER PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT, ALEXANDRIA

What makes a school great, then? We asked millennials to look at a variety of factors that can play a role in making a school great, or can cause a school to struggle. **And on this, we found there is consensus is on the biggest factor that determines if a school thrives or struggles: the quality of the teaching that happens at the school.** Teacher creativity and flexibility, along with a positive and safe school culture, are viewed as the most important factors in making a school a “quality public school”. For millennials, a quality school isn't necessarily about money or test scores, as only 30 percent say that “ample school funding” is one of the most important factors in whether a school is a quality school, and only 19 percent say the same of “good scores on achievement tests.” Meanwhile, nearly half (49 percent) say that it is teacher creativity and flexibility that make a quality public school, followed by “safe learning environment” (39 percent) and “positive culture in the school” (37 percent).

If teachers are what make a school thrive, then what causes a school to be struggling or failing? Here, millennials again point to teaching as an essential factor, with some 46 percent of millennials say that “ineffective teaching” is one of the most important factors in what causes a school to struggle, followed closely by “inadequate school funding” (41 percent).

Millennials get that education is key to opportunity, and also know that not every student has a chance to access a quality education. So what should be done about it? Is the problem that schools today need big changes, or is the problem mostly that schools are underfunded? While school funding rises to second-place on the list of factors that cause a school to struggle, we wanted to put this idea to the test in a heads-up question: do schools need big change, or do they just need more funding?



Teachers are key.

The most important factors to a “quality public school” are:

Teacher creativity

Teacher flexibility

A positive and safe school culture

On this question, the result was overwhelming: millennials think “schools today need big changes in order to create opportunity for students,” with 74 percent choosing that statement over the assertion that “schools today don’t need big changes, they just need more funding” (26 percent). Millennials who felt their own education was only “fair” or “poor” are even more emphatic, with 80 percent saying schools today “need big changes.” This finding cut across race, gender, and political ideology.

Of course, there is more than one way to pose this question. We also offered respondents a contrast that pitted the upsides and downsides of big change against one another. Do millennials worry more that we will make change and it will be “too radical, and throw out the things that are working best in schools today” or that we will instead not make significant enough change? **Most – 58 percent – worry more that “we won’t make significant enough changes in our schools, and the problems in schools today will keep getting worse.”**

74%

of millennials think “schools today need big changes in order to create opportunity for students.”

MILLENNIALS AND TEACHING

Teaching, in the minds of most millennials, is the essential ingredient that makes a school thrive or struggle. And most millennials think that the job of teaching these days is both essential and ever more challenging. Nearly two-thirds of millennials think that being a public school teachers is more difficult “than it was twenty or thirty years ago,” a view that is particularly pronounced among millennial women (70 percent), millennials in their thirties (70 percent), and those with either a four-year (72 percent) or graduate (81 percent) degree.

At the same time, few have an opinion on teacher’s *unions*, with only sixteen percent of millennials holding a positive view of teacher’s unions and sixteen percent holding a negative view. (The remaining two-thirds report being neutral or having not heard enough about them).

Who should be able to be a teacher, then? When asked about opening up the teaching profession to those without an education degree, six-in-ten millennials think that it should be possible for someone with “real-world experience” but no education degree to become a teacher “because we need people from career fields like science and engineering to be able to educate students,” while 40 percent say it should not be possible to become a teacher without an education degree. By a two-to-one margin, millennial men think it should be possible for those without education degrees to become teachers, while millennial women are much more evenly divided. Those in rural areas are among the most enthusiastic about alternative pathways to teaching, with 67 percent saying it should be possible to teach without an education degree.

The job of teaching these days is essential and ever more challenging.

65%

of millennials think that being a public school teacher is more difficult “than it was twenty or thirty years ago.”

“We have a robotics expert who worked in engineering. He teaches robotics and tech, which is cool. Who cares if he wasn't a teacher, he's teaching his field.”

MALE, HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER, DENVER

But while there is an openness to change in how we define who can become a teacher, there is resistance among millennials to changes in how teachers are evaluated and compensated. We presented respondents with a debate over “pay-for-performance” in teaching, asking them to choose which statement they agree with more: that teachers should be paid “in part based on how much their students learn each year, since this is what matters most” or if “credentials and experience” should be the determining factor because “it is too difficult and unfair to judge them on other factors.” By a nearly two-to-one margin, our respondents say to stick with credentials and experience as the primary determining factor in teacher pay.

67%

of millennials in rural areas support alternative pathways to teaching, saying it should be possible to teach **without an education degree.**

MILLENNIALS AND SCHOOL CHOICE

Millennials say that access to a quality education is key to getting ahead in life, and they also know that it is where you live that largely determines where American students go to school these days. In our survey, 69 percent of respondents say that “the neighborhood that a student lives in” is the factor that determines which public school a student attends, while only 15 percent think it is mostly a matter of parental preference. In focus groups, respondents would often talk about their own parents having moved to an area with good schools, or having done so themselves for their own children.

"I think socioeconomic status is huge, because you're right, it is based on where you live and literally what street you live, but they only often choose where they live specifically for the schools. My family moved from one side of Montgomery County to another so that we could be in a specific school district ... Or not school district, like school neighborhood, whatever. That was a conscious choice that was made."

FEMALE, FORMER PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT, ALEXANDRIA

When the question changed from what *does* determine where kids go to school, to what *should* determine where kids go to school, the conversation becomes more uncertain and uncomfortable. While nearly seven-in-ten millennials say it is your address that determines your school, only 29 percent think this is how it *should* be. Some 44 percent say that it should be “the preference of the student’s parents,” with another 27 percent saying that they simply aren’t sure what should determine where a student goes.



70%

of millennials say your address determines your school

but only

29%

think this is how it should be.

The reality is that very few millennials are very familiar with the concept of “school choice” – only fourteen percent in our survey research said as much. Another third report being “somewhat familiar,” but the majority of millennials say they are unfamiliar with the concept. As a result, many do not have an opinion on whether “school choice” is positive or negative; 27 percent say school choice is “positive” while ten percent say it is “negative”; most hold a neutral view or say they have simply not heard enough about it.

Some responses to the question: "What is school choice?"

+ “Where a person decides to go to school, or send their kid to school.”

MALE, FORMER PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT, ATLANTA

+ “Where the school has the choice to have different pathways for the kids.”

FEMALE, FORMER PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT, ATLANTA

+ “I think people need to be educated on what a school choice is. Because I still feel like I need to educate myself more and I'm in this field.” -

FEMALE, ELEMENTARY TEACHER, ALEXANDRIA

In our focus groups, we encountered varying levels of awareness of and support for school choice from city to city. For instance, respondents in Denver – where parents have a great deal of influence over where their children attend school – were much more familiar with choice than were respondents in northern Virginia.

As a result, we then provided survey respondents with a basic description of the concept of “school choice”, describing it in this way:

“School choice means that a student can choose to attend a different school than the one for which they are zoned. Instead of being assigned a school based on one’s neighborhood, students would be able to apply to attend a different school in the district.”

After being provided with this definition, half say they believe school choice is positive, while only eight percent view it as being negative. (Another thirty percent say they are neutral on the idea after hearing the description.) Furthermore, once the concept is defined, some 43 percent of millennials say they think that parents and students in the district where they live do have the ability to choose what school their child attends.

While the broad concept of school choice may be well-received, there are different levels of support for different types of school choice. These differences emerge both in terms of the circumstances under which a student should be able to attend a different school than the one for which they are “zoned,” and the type of school a student should be able to then select.

We asked millennials “under what circumstances, if any, should a student be able to attend a different school than the one for which they are zoned or assigned based on their address Nearly half (49 percent) say that students should be able to attend a different school “if their parent thinks another school is better for them for any reason,” while only twelve percent say there is no circumstance that warrants allowing choice.

Adding together the respondents who chose “for any reason” with those who chose particular circumstances, we found 56 percent of millennials believing that a lack of certain academic programs

(such as AP courses) warranted allowing school choice, and 58 percent felt that if a student is assigned to a failing school, they should be able to choose to attend elsewhere. Some 72 percent felt that a student should be able to attend a school for which they are not specifically zoned “if they have special needs or talents better suited to a different school.”

There is less agreement over what type of school a student should be able to attend “while being able to take some of that state or local funding to their new school.” Nearly half (49 percent) support letting the funding follow the student to another traditional public school, and 38 percent support this for public non-profit charter schools. However, only 28 percent believe the funding should be able to go to a private, non-religious school, and only 17 percent think funding should be able to go to a religiously-affiliated school.

We presented our millennial respondents with two debates over school choice to see where they stood once they heard both the arguments for and against the concept.

Where supporters of school choice have the strongest argument is in making the case that school choice will open doors for kids who need it. By an overwhelming three-to-one margin, millennials side with those who support school choice who “say that every child should have access to a good school, and that means parents should have the ability to put their child in a quality school regardless of their zipcode or financial situation, especially if the school in their neighborhood does not set students up for good opportunities in the future,” while only 26 percent side with those who oppose school choice who “say that public money should stay in public schools, and that this just encourages districts to abandon struggling schools rather than working to fix them.”

“If the family lives in a poor neighborhood and the child is smart, the child wants to go to the school in the nicer neighborhood, where the other smarter kids go, then they now have that choice to do that, instead of having to find an address or moving, when they may not be able to afford it.”

FEMALE, FORMER PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT, ATLANTA

Presented with a different angle on the debate over school choice, one that focuses on school choice as a vehicle for encouraging schools to improve their performance, school choice supporters win but by a narrower margin. Some 61 percent of millennials say they side with school choice

49%

say that a student should be able to attend a different school if their parent thinks another school is **better for them for any reason.**

74%

of millennials say **every child should have access to a good school**, and that means parents should have the ability to put their child in a quality school regardless of their zipcode or financial situation.

supporters who “say that letting parents send their child to the school of their choice in a district will put more students in schools that are providing opportunity while encouraging failing schools to change how they operate,” with 39 percent instead siding with school choice opponents who “say that struggling schools do not need threats and pressure but instead need help; what is needed is help for the students, teachers, and schools who are struggling.”

“... it gives the students, the parents more opportunity and choices to go to another school that is excelling. As far as the funding, I think the county or the city has the funding, that's why they're presenting that opportunity... I think it's like when your school meets this criteria they receive money. That school may not. It's like an incentive for that school to strive to receive that additional funding.”

FEMALE, FORMER PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENT, ATLANTA

MILLENNIALS AND PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS

In much the same way that few millennials have familiarity with or a strong opinion on school choice, few are very familiar with public charter schools. Only 43 percent say they are at least “somewhat familiar” with public charters, and only 14 say they are “very familiar.” Before being given a definition, 22 percent of millennials say they have a positive view of public charter schools, and 14 percent hold a negative view, with the rest saying they are neutral or simply do not know enough. Initial awareness of and positivity toward charters is highest among millennials in their thirties, while initial negativity toward charters is much higher among white respondents (17 percent) than among black (6 percent) or Hispanic (10 percent) respondents.

As we did with “school choice,” we then provided survey respondents with a basic description of public charter schools, describing them in this way:

“Charter schools are public schools that are able to operate under a different set of guidelines than the traditional schools. However, they have to be tuition-free, open to all students, and not have special entrance requirements. In exchange for having flexibility to do some things differently than the traditional schools, they are periodically required to demonstrate that they are doing a good job educating students, and lose their ‘charter’ if they are not performing adequately.”

Once defined in that way, positive views of charters increase from 22 to 40 percent, and grow most significantly among white respondents (+24 percent “positive”) compared to black (+7) or Hispanic (+9) respondents. Only 13 percent overall hold a negative view of charters based on the aforementioned description.

We then asked respondents about the things charters sometimes do differently from traditional public schools, and found that not *all* differences are viewed positively.

Take length of a school day or school year: While some charters have longer school days or school years, millennials are divided on whether that is a good or bad thing. On this question, much of the division is driven by respondent age, with millennials who are not so far removed from their own time as students being much more opposed to longer school days (62 percent say it is a “bad thing”) than millennials in their thirties, among whom a comparable number (61 percent) say longer days are a *good* thing. A similar result occurs when asked about longer school years, with 59 percent of millennials under 25 saying it is a “bad thing” compared to 61 percent of millennials age 30 and older thinking longer school years are good.

But on most other items where charters are able to do things in a different way, millennials are open to letting charters try something new.

Recall that millennials are broadly opposed to “pay-for-performance” as a way of evaluating and compensating teachers; nonetheless, 75 percent think it would be a “good thing” to let charters “pay teachers according to their job performance,” while only 25 percent think this would be a bad thing. A whopping 84 percent think it would be a good thing if charters “hire more teachers who have backgrounds in professions besides teaching,” and the same number believe it would be a good thing to “teach a more challenging curriculum” compared to the traditional public schools. Two-thirds think it is a good thing for charters to be able to “establish a stricter or ‘zero-tolerance’ discipline code.”

And while millennials may be divided over whether public schools should focus on making students college-ready upon graduation, they are overwhelmingly supportive of the idea that it is good for a charter school to be able to have that kind of a focus; 83 percent think that it is a good thing for a charter to be able to “establish a culture that expects all students should be college ready.” On this question, there is almost no difference based on the education level of the respondent; eight-in-ten of those with graduate degrees and those with a high school diploma or less all support this notion.



75%

think it would be a “good thing” to let charters “pay teachers **according to their job performance.**”



83%

think that it is a good thing for a charter to be able to “establish a culture that expects **all students should be college ready.**”

As we did with school choice, we presented respondents with a debate over charter schools. Some 63 percent of millennials side with “those who support public charter schools [who] say that traditional public schools are often stuck in an outdated model, and that charter schools can be more creative and effective in how they teach students, leading to more opportunity, especially for kids who would otherwise have to attend a poorly-performing traditional public school,” while 37 percent instead side with “those who oppose public charter schools [who] say that they take resources away from traditional public schools and are only accessible to kids whose parents take the initiative to put them into the lotteries to get in, and that rather than having more charters we should invest more in traditional public schools.”

DEEP DIVE: THE MILLENNIAL PARENT

Today's millennials aren't just former students; they are now increasingly becoming parents themselves. In our focus group and survey, we took a deeper look at those millennials who are already parents (or, in the case of our focus groups, are parents of kids in the K-12 system). The parents in our focus groups and survey sample, as one might imagine, skew toward the older side of the millennial generation; in the survey, over half of the parents surveyed are age 30 to 35, while only 17 percent are under age 25.

On many items, parents and non-parent millennials hold similar views. Both groups think that education is a key determining factor in whether someone has an opportunity to get ahead. Both groups think it is a mix of a student's hard work and the finances of their parents that primarily determine whether someone gets a quality education. Both groups tend to think they got at least a "good" education themselves, and both parents and non-parents have fairly similar responses to whether or not their own K-12 education prepared them for college, career, or adult life.

Yet parents, far more than non-parents, think the average student today is getting at least a good education. While a majority of parents in the survey think the average student gets a "good" or "very good" education (52 percent), that number falls to only one-third among non-parents.

Parents also view themselves as being one of the most important factors in whether or not a school is quality, with more choosing "strong parental involvement" (44 percent) as a key factor in school quality than any other

Parents have a more optimistic view than non-parents.

Is the average student getting a "good" or "very good" education?

52%

of parents say yes

33%

of non-parents say yes

factor besides “teacher creativity and flexibility” (45 percent). For non-parents, the role of “strong parental involvement” only comes in fifth out of the nine options presented. Similarly, parents view “poor parental involvement” as the second biggest driver of struggling or failing schools, a factor that is in the bottom half of the list for non-parents.

“I believe that the schools play a part, but the parents play a bigger part.”

FATHER, DENVER

While parents share an appetite for “big change” in our schools with non-parents, they are more apprehensive about change going too far. While only 24 percent think today’s schools “just need more funding,” a majority say they are more worried “that we’ll make changes in our schools that are too radical, and throw out the things that are working best in schools today.” They are slightly less supportive of “pay-for-performance” for teachers than non-parents are, and are also slightly more apprehensive about alternative pathways to teaching, though a majority (55 percent) do support letting people with real-world experience but no teaching degree serve in the classroom.

And while a plurality of both parents and non-parents alike say that students should go to school determined by the preferences of the parents, parents (39 percent) are far more likely than non-parents (26 percent) to say it should be someone’s address that determines where a student goes. However, when presented with overarching debates over school choice – that it provides opportunity, and that it encourages struggling schools to improve – the views of parents and non-parents are nearly identical, with most aligning with supporters of choice.

While parents and non-parents are also initially similarly unfamiliar with the concept of school choice, parents report being slightly more familiar with “public charter schools” than are non-parents, with a majority of parents (51 percent) initially saying they are at least somewhat familiar with them, and with far more parents (32 percent) than non-parents (19 percent) holding an initial positive view.

Parents are also more open to many of the things that charter schools do differently from traditional public schools, including and especially zero-tolerance discipline codes and longer school days. As we found a gap between old and young, so too we find a gap between parents and non-parents, with parents thinking it is a good idea to have a longer school day (59 percent) compared to non-parents (43 percent). On “zero-tolerance discipline codes”, some 81 percent of parents think this is a good idea, compared to only 61 percent of non-parents.

The gap shrinks on the question of longer school year, with 53 percent of parents and 49 percent of non-parents thinking this is a good idea. And on items such as more difficult curriculum, alternative pathways to teaching, teacher pay-for-performance, and creating a college-readiness culture, there is very little difference between parents and non-parents.

DEEP DIVE: THE MILLENNIAL TEACHER

As new teachers enter the workforce, they are increasingly coming from the ranks of the millennial generation. And millennial teachers overwhelmingly believe they have it harder than the teachers who came before, with nearly seven-in-ten saying it is definitely harder to be a teacher today than it was twenty or thirty years ago.

In many ways, millennial teachers hold views that align with their non-teaching peers. They think education is the key to opportunity and they think a student's own effort as well as parental financial resources are the two most important factors in whether a student has access to a quality education.

Even more than non-teachers, they feel their own education was a good one, and they have an even more negative view of the education the average student receives today, with two-thirds of millennial teachers saying students get a "fair" or "poor" education these days. And teachers have higher expectations for what our schools should be doing for kids; while only half of millennials overall think that students should be college-ready upon leaving high school, that climbs to nearly eight-in-ten millennial teachers.

Teachers – like parents – view their own role in schools as a critical one. For teachers, it is positive culture inside a school (56 percent) and teacher creativity and flexibility (52 percent) that most signify a thriving school, and nearly half say that it is "ineffective teaching" that plays a role in a failing school. (This factor is second only to inadequate funding, the top choice for millennial teachers for why some schools struggle.)

Teachers are also open to the idea of big change in the abstract, with 69 percent saying they think schools need big changes in how they function, while only 31 percent say schools mostly need more funding. A majority (56 percent) are more worried that we will be too timid in reforming schools, rather than being too radical (44 percent).

"It's lacking flexibility too. We're transitioning our school. There's a lot of 25-plus year teachers and they're set in their ways. They don't like changing and I don't really remember 25 years ago that well. But a change needs a change. Teachers need change. We already talked about that. So you definitely need to be flexible."

FEMALE, ELEMENTARY TEACHER, ALEXANDRIA

Yet despite this believe that schools today are falling short for kids, and despite having a broad appetite for change, millennial teachers are hesitant to embrace a number of potential changes in the public school system, especially ones that would directly affect them.

“I love the idea that I could be rewarded for how well I do but how do you tell how well I do? Standardized test data? I mean, come on, right? I love the idea. In our school we do, our evaluations are 50% data driven. It can be unit tests or standardized testing, it depends on what you teach. 50% is your professional personal goals that you set up similar to what you're talking about. We get a lot of good growth in that 50% area. The other one is a little bit harder to deal with. Again, if we all believed in our standardized testing, we thought that those were hitting the points then sure, but I think it's challenging just to say yes.”

MALE, HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER, DENVER

For instance, millennial teachers are divided on whether or not those without an education degree should be able to teach in the classroom, while millennials overall tend to support the idea. And while millennials overall lean against supporting “pay-for-performance” measures, millennial teachers feel that way much more strongly, with 88 percent saying that it should be credentials and experience, rather than what their students learn, that should determine their pay. Even when asked about their own compensation, 77 percent of millennial teachers would prefer to be paid via a system of “steps” based on degrees and years in the classroom, while only 14 percent would prefer to be paid based on their evaluations and their students’ progress.

This is not to say they oppose all new approaches to compensation; two-thirds (65 percent) would prefer to receive portable retirement benefits via a 401(k) or other form of retirement account, while only one-in-five would prefer a traditional pension that vests after a decade of service.

Millennial teachers are also fairly positive about teacher unions. In our focus groups, most teachers knew little about what their union did for them besides provide legal support should they ever face accusations or disciplinary action. In the survey, a plurality of teachers (48 percent) say they are positive about teachers’ unions, with another 45 percent saying they are either neutral or have not heard enough about them. Roughly half of our millennial teachers

91%

of millennial teachers think it is **more difficult to be a teacher today** than twenty or thirty years ago.

reported being dues-paying union members, and of those, 69 percent had a positive view of teacher's unions, though only 7 percent felt that teachers like themselves had "a lot" of influence over the policies and priorities supported by the union. (In total, just over half felt that they had at least a fair amount of influence over union policies and priorities.)

"The teacher that was there before, he I guess got charges filed on him because he restrained a student too hard. The union had to fight for him to keep his job and stuff like that. When I heard that I got scared so I was like, 'Well it's protection.' It's protection for my pay."

FEMALE, MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL TEACHER, DENVER

Some 87 percent of dues-paying union member teachers said they felt they benefitted from union membership. In contrast, among the half of teachers who did not pay dues to a union, 63 percent said the union in their state or district did not benefit them.

On choice and charters, millennial teachers are somewhat positive, but are less upbeat than their non-teacher counterparts. As with millennials overall, a gap exists between what "is" and what "should be" in determining how students are assigned to a school. 88 percent of teachers **say "the neighborhood that student lives in" typically determines which public schools students attend, while only 40 percent of teachers think this is how things *should* work.**

While teachers are much more familiar with the concept of school choice, their views toward school choice start off negative, with only 19 percent of millennial teachers initially holding a positive view of choice, a view that improves by 20 points once choice is defined. Furthermore, teachers are even more likely than millennials overall to think student should be able to choose a different school if they have special needs and talents, or if their zoned school does not offer programs such as Advanced Placement. A healthy majority (58 percent) of millennial teachers are supportive of funding "following a student" provided that student continues to attend a different traditional public school. However, when presented with two debates over school choice where millennials overall tend to side with supporters of school choice, millennial take the opposite view, with millennial teachers leaning toward the opposition on keeping "public money in public schools, and with 63 percent saying that failing schools do not need the threat of school choice but rather need more support and help in order to become better.

On public charters, millennial teachers similarly begin with a slightly negative view (33 percent negative, 22 percent positive), and move to a positive view once public charter schools are defined (27 percent negative, 34 percent positive). Millennial teachers largely think it is a “good idea” for charter schools to have flexibility to teach more challenging curriculum (91 percent) and create a culture that expects students to be college ready (85 percent). However, millennial teachers are less eager for charters to have longer school days (44 percent) and school years (50 percent), as well as “pay-for-performance” (46 percent).

Charters divide millennial teachers, with a slim majority (55 percent) of millennial teachers tend to side with arguments from opponents of charter schools who criticize them for taking resources away from traditional public schools, compared to 45 percent who agree with supporters of charters who argue that they offer “more opportunity” for many kids who need it.

Echelon Insights, on behalf of the **Walton Family Foundation** and the **Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity**, conducted an opinion research study on millennial adults in the US during the spring and summer of 2017.

During May and June 2017, Echelon Insights conducted a series of six focus groups in the following cities:

- + Alexandria, VA (Millennial public school teachers and millennial former public school students)
- + Atlanta, GA (Millennial mothers and millennial former public school students)
- + Denver, CO (Millennial fathers and millennial public school teachers)

These focus groups were followed by a survey of 800 adults aged 18-35 across the United States, conducted June 21-July 5, 2017 via YouGov web panel (margin of error of +/- 4.9%). The survey included an additional oversample to total 300 interviews with K-12 teachers aged 18-35 (margin of error of +/- 7.1%).

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