

Voices on the state of public education

Support for K-12 Education in Oregon



WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



Half of survey respondents across the state believe Oregon has good schools. Respondents elevate Oregon teachers' support of students.



The lack of adequate funding for schools is a top concern across the state. Respondents cite increased funding as key to improving Oregon's schools.



Overcrowding and school facility updates are primary concerns in select counties. Aging infrastructure and growing class sizes reflect the need for updated school facilities.



Respondents—especially people of color—are concerned about the education workforce. Even as Oregon's student body diversifies, schools struggle to attract and retain enough racially diverse teachers and staff.

About Oregon Voices

In an increasingly urban state and nation, rural residents often find themselves unseen and unheard in the systems and decision making that affect their daily lives. Oregon Voices amplifies lived experiences in the state's less densely populated areas to identify common cause statewide – a first for Oregon.

This issue brief summarizes key findings from the Oregon Voices survey that focus on education concerns, needs and opportunities.

For more information about our research methods, please visit orvoices.org.

While half of Oregon Voices respondents report that Oregon has good schools, we heard from many survey respondents across Oregon that the quality of K-12 education is a primary concern. Although the Oregon Voices survey asked few questions focused on education, many people commented on their local schools in open-ended responses. Different than other Oregon Voices issue briefs, we include outside data throughout the information that follows to contextualize the survey findings.



What we know about education in Oregon

Our future depends on high-quality public education. High-quality education leads to many positive social determinants of health, including greater financial stability, food and housing security, increased community and civic involvement, and overall improved well-being in other important social, emotional, and economic facets of life. Communities across Oregon need high-quality public education in order to become prosperous places where children and their families can succeed. The state's "40-40-20 Education Goal" is one of the highest-reaching state-level education goals in the country and aims for all young Oregonians to complete at least a high school diploma or the equivalent.¹

Though this brief focuses on K-12 education, we know that early childhood education investments have significant returns for students and the system. Every dollar spent on early childhood education returns 13% through better long-term life outcomes and reduction of negative outcomes.² This includes less risky behaviors and participation in crime and higher long-term education outcomes and lifetime earnings. The earlier the investment in a child's future, the better.

Money—and how it's spent—matters when it comes to education. For example, a 10% increase in per-pupil spending for 12 years of public school education is associated with higher wages and reduced adult poverty, especially for low-income students.³ Greater per student funding also leads to higher test scores and graduation rates and improved school quality.⁴ After 20 years with an average funding gap of nearly 30%, Oregon created a new revenue stream for K-12 education and nearly met the state funding target. The state is now reviewing and updating its cost model.

KNOW THE FACTS

552,380
public K-12 students⁵

1,285
Number of public schools

43%
Proportion of Title 1 eligible schools where at least 40% of students are low-income

2 out of 3
Ratio of Oregon's high schools that are rural

42%
Percent of Oregon's public high school students enrolled at rural high schools

\$15,754
Spending per K-12 student, 3.6% below average for reporting states⁶

1 Higher Education Coordinating Commission, *Oregon's Educational Attainment Goals*, 2024. oregon.gov/highered/strategy-research/pages/state-goals.aspx

2 García, J.L., Heckman, J.J., Leaf, D.E., Prados, M.J. (2017). *Quantifying the Life-Cycle Benefits of a Prototypical Early Childhood Program*. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper No. 23479.

3 Jackson, K.C., Johnson, R.C., and Persico, C. (2015). *The Effects of School Spending on Educational and Economic Outcomes: Evidence from School Finance Reforms*. National Bureau of Economic Research Working Paper Series.

4 E.g., Miller, Corbin (2017). *The Effect of Education Spending on Student Achievement: Evidence from Property Tax Wealth and School Finance Rules*; Schanzenbach, D., Boddy, D., Mumford, M., and Nantz, G. (2016). *Fourteen Economic Facts on Education and Economic Opportunity*. The Hamilton Project.

5 U.S. Census Bureau, Annual Survey of School System Finances, preliminary release. *How Did Covid-19 Affect School Finances*, 2022. [gov/library/visualizations/interactive/how-did-covid-19-affect-school-finances.html](https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/interactive/how-did-covid-19-affect-school-finances.html)

6 Ibid



Households with and without school-age children

Households with and without school-age children responded to the Oregon Voices survey and shared their thoughts on the state of their communities' schools. Through the direct quotes throughout this brief, we elevate the experiences of households with children, those most directly affected by Oregon's current education system. Nearly one in five respondents had a school-age child in their home, a share similar to that of Oregon's population (Figure 1).

A greater share of respondents who identified as Black, Indigenous or a person of color lived in households with children (42%) compared to white respondents (21%) (Figure 2),⁷ and of those a relatively high share had school-age children in their households: 35% compared to 17% for white respondents. Similar shares of respondents living in urban and rural Oregon reported living in households with children (Figure 3).

What Oregonians said about education in our state

Oregonians of all backgrounds are concerned about the state's education system. Although half of the respondents reported satisfaction with the schools in their communities, various aspects of the education system also deeply concern them.

When asked the open-ended question, "What was the biggest challenge your community faced in 2020?"

10% of respondents expressed concern regarding schools.



Figure 1: Percent of respondent households with children ages 0-17, by age group

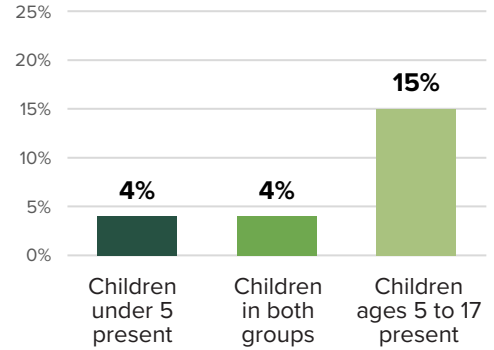


Figure 2: Percent of respondent households with children, BIPOC vs. white

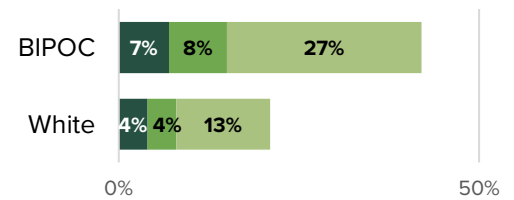


Figure 3: Percent of respondent households with children, self-defined urban vs. rural



Note: In the unlikely event that more than one member of a household completed the Oregon Voices survey, those households may be double-counted

⁷ Black, Indigenous, Latino/Hispanic, Asian American Pacific Islander, and other people of color made up 13% of Oregon Voices respondents. White is defined as white alone.





Half of survey respondents across the state believe Oregon has good schools.

When asked their level of agreement with the statement, “In my community, we have good schools,” on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), 50% of respondents selected a 4 or 5. Respondents who were white or had higher incomes were more likely to agree with the statement “We have good schools” (Figure 4).

Based on open-ended responses, the top positive attribute of Oregon’s schools was teachers’ strong support of students.



“Es mucho mejor que en otras comunidades, el distrito escolar ha estado atento a las necesidades de los estudiantes, al contrario de otras comunidades. (It is much better than in other communities, the school district has been attentive to the needs of the students, unlike other communities.)”

Rural household with children aged 5 to 17, Latino/Hispanic, Marion County



“Our schools are fantastic and an integral part of our community.”

Rural household with children aged 5 to 17, white, Wheeler County



“...the teaching staff [are] very committed to helping the WHOLE student.”

Rural household with no school-age children, white, Clatsop County

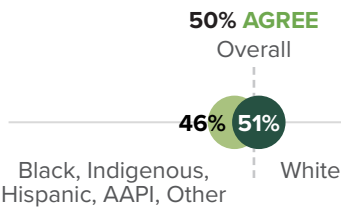
Figure 4: School satisfaction varies by race/ethnicity, income level, presence of children, and geography.

Responses to the prompt: “Please tell us how much you agree or disagree: In my community, we have good schools,” from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

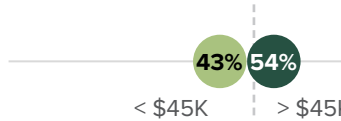
AGREE = Rating of 4 or 5 out of 5

** Differences are statistically significant.*

Race/ethnicity*



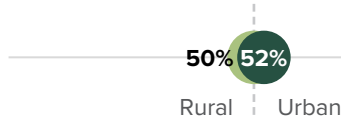
Income level*



Children present



Geography





The lack of adequate funding for schools is a top concern across the state.

A top concern expressed in response to the open-ended question, “What is one thing that concerns you about the place where you live?” was inadequate funding for schools. This echoes other research showing the need for Oregon to increase public school funding to improve quality and student outcomes.

The largest share of open-ended responses regarding education came from Douglas, Lane and Umatilla counties. Key concerns from those counties included the following:

- **Douglas County:** Lack of funds and resources for schools; concern around low educational attainment; perceived lack of value for education; and the need for more educational opportunities
- **Lane County:** Lack of public support of schools through bonds and taxes and the impact of this on schools; the need for support of teachers and low-income or students of color
- **Umatilla County:** The need to update schools to keep up with population growth



“Lack of funding for school resources and supports. It has gotten better but we still need help.”

Rural household with children aged 5 to 17, white, Douglas County



“I wish people here valued services for children more than we do. I wish people would support the school bond measure and would support more funding for parks, particularly the planned turf soccer fields.”

Rural household with children aged 5 to 17, white, Douglas County



How we fund Oregon’s public schools

The Oregon Legislature funds public schools biennially through the State School Fund.⁸ Sources for this fund include:

- Income taxes
- Lottery receipts
- Fund for Student Success

Local revenue, primarily property taxes, also help fund schools. Additional funding for school infrastructure, nutrition, special education and professional development comes from other state and federal resources.

Learn more about education funding in Oregon in the state’s 2023 K-12 **Education Funding Report**.

⁸ Legislative Policy and Research Office, *K-12 Education Funding*, 2023. oregonlegislature.gov/lpro/Publications/Education%20Funding%20Background%20Report%202023.pdf. See also Oregon Blue Book, *Public Education*. sos.oregon.gov/blue-book/Pages/education-public.aspx



Overcrowding and school facility updates are primary concerns in select counties.

Oregon Voices respondents feel the effects of population changes in their schools, and Oregonians with school-age children are experiencing the burdens of the state's outdated school infrastructure.

School facilities that have not kept up with technology, culture, and population changes were a top concern for Oregon Voices respondents, especially in Clackamas, Douglas, Harney, Polk and Umatilla counties. Like most of the state, these counties have experienced general and student population growth.⁹

Respondents' concerns about infrastructure reflect the findings of maintenance cost evaluations. In 2014, a task force estimated that Oregon schools had more than \$7 billion worth of deferred maintenance costs.¹⁰ The Statewide School Facilities Assessment program authorizes the Oregon Department of Education to conduct facility condition assessments, expected to begin in July 2024, with the goal of providing no-cost, up-to-date reports that detail deferred maintenance needs and cost estimates.¹¹

In addition, Oregonians are concerned about overcrowded classrooms, particularly respondents in Polk, Douglas, Clackamas, Harney and Umatilla counties, each of which was experiencing positive net migration — more people moving into the county — at the time of the survey.¹²

An exception is in Wheeler County, where respondents shared concern about dwindling school sizes, suggesting the need to combine schools. While the county experienced positive net migration, its districts' median class sizes were low—between just 5 and 9 students.

⁹ U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Table B01003, 2017-2021, 5-year estimates updated annually, 2022.

¹⁰ [Oregon.gov, Statewide School Facilities Assessment, oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/pages/statewide-school-facilities-assessment.aspx](https://www.oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/pages/statewide-school-facilities-assessment.aspx), See also Oregon Department of Education, *Quality Education Model*, p. 32, 2022.

¹¹ Oregon Department of Education, *Statewide School Facilities Assessment, oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/pages/statewide-school-facilities-assessment.aspx*

¹² U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey, Table B01003, 2017-2021, 5-year estimates updated annually, 2022.

“The schools need to be updated and better. We need a sports facility for the youth to support our future athletes.”

Rural household with children aged 5 to 17, white, Clackamas County



“Our community is growing quickly and has outgrown our streets and the available housing. Schools are full because of the influx of people.”

Rural household with no children, white, Umatilla County



“It's a great place to raise kids, although the middle schools are too large at 1,000 kids each for our little rural children. The high school is 2,000 kids but with lots of clubs and age-appropriate blending it is easier and can be navigated.”

Rural household with children aged 5 to 17, white, Douglas County



“Not enough kids in the school.... Our schools are struggling with few children and need to combine... their school districts to form a larger, stronger, school in rural towns in Eastern Oregon”

Rural household with children aged 5 to 17, white, Wheeler County





Respondents—especially people of color—are concerned about the education workforce.

Oregon’s education system struggles to attract and retain enough educators. Oregon Voices respondents observe that teachers depart their schools, in some cases due to housing costs or inadequate pay. Respondents report that this is especially true for Black, Indigenous, AAPI or Latino/Hispanic teachers. This echoes recommendations for the state to resolve its educator crisis by increasing support for teachers and staff across grade levels and subjects.¹³ An educator workforce that reflects student demographics is beneficial for all students.¹⁴

Oregon Voices respondents from specific counties—Clatsop, Jefferson, Klamath and Lane—expressed relatively more concern about the lack of teachers in general and teacher diversity and implications for student supports, culturally relevant resources, and teacher retention.

Of these four counties, Jefferson is the most diverse, with 65% of the district student population identifying as BIPOC. However, only 14% of the district’s teachers and 20% of adults overall are BIPOC—an example of Oregon’s limited growth in rates of teachers and administrators of color.¹⁵ The three other counties are less racially diverse but still have between 18 and 29 percentage points of difference between BIPOC teachers and students.

The gap between student and teacher diversity in Oregon has been unchanged since 2011, with BIPOC teachers making up 12% of the statewide teacher workforce compared to BIPOC students’ 40% of the student population.¹⁶ In half of Oregon counties, the difference between BIPOC student and teacher shares is 20 percentage points or more. Including teachers, staff, and administrators, about 17% of adults in the Oregon public school system identify as Black, Indigenous, Latino/Hispanic, Asian Pacific Islander or another race other than white.

¹³ Oregon Department of Education, *Quality Education Model*, 2022.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Oregon Department of Education Educator Advancement Council, *Educator Equity Report*, 2022. oregon.gov/tspc/about/Publications_and_Reports/2022_Oregon_Educator_Equity_Report.pdf

¹⁶ Oregon Department of Education, *Student Fall Membership Report*. oregon.gov/ode/reports-and-data/students/pages/student-enrollment-reports.aspx; ECONorthwest, *The Impact of Oregon State School Fund Spending on Disparities between Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) Students and Non-BIPOC Students*, 2023. Prepared for the Oregon Department of Education, [oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/Documents/The%20Impact%20of%20Oregon%20State%20School%20Fund%20Spending%20on%20Disparities%20between%20Black,%20Indigenous,%20and%20People%20of%20Color%20\(BIPOC\)%20Students%20and%20Non-BIPOC%20Students%20Full%20Report.pdf](https://oregon.gov/ode/schools-and-districts/grants/Documents/The%20Impact%20of%20Oregon%20State%20School%20Fund%20Spending%20on%20Disparities%20between%20Black,%20Indigenous,%20and%20People%20of%20Color%20(BIPOC)%20Students%20and%20Non-BIPOC%20Students%20Full%20Report.pdf).

“Presence of diverse, equitable options without competent people to work there (example: Spanish immersion school without teachers that actually speak Spanish).”

Urban household with no children, Hispanic/Latino, Lane County



“I am very concerned about our educators. As a teacher, the amount of stress we are experiencing is unparalleled. Even those of us with years of experience are struggling. A lot of the students are [not used to a classroom] from being out of school so long and nowhere near grade level.”

Rural household with no children, white, Josephine County



“We lack qualified substitutes - I know because I am currently a long-term sub because the administration couldn't find anyone else. We have too many unfilled positions at the school and we lost many teachers over the summer to higher-paying districts. As teachers become scarce, rural schools—which generally pay less—will shoulder most of the burden.”

Rural household with children aged 5 to 17, white, Lane County



What leaders and community builders should know

Many challenges described in this brief can be addressed, at least in part, through a fully funded education system. The new funding stream from the 2019 Student Success Act has narrowed the state's school funding gap. If we hope to see results such as higher educational attainment and graduation rates, Oregon should follow the recommendations outlined by the Quality Education Commission: 1) Update methods of calculating the cost of high-quality public education; 2) Close any resulting funding gap; 3) Provide guidelines on the types of investments that have the greatest chance of boosting student outcomes; and 4) Build systems designed to continuously improve.¹⁷

An anticipated investment: In early 2024, the Biden-Harris Administration announced the Oregon Department of Education as one of eight recipients of Supporting America's School Infrastructure program.¹⁸ ODE is expected to receive just under \$5 million over the next five years to support its school districts in improving school facilities. Initial assessments will provide a better understanding of the highest-need districts and increase the equitable distribution of funds throughout the state to ensure equitable access to healthy, sustainable, and modern learning environments for all students.

The research team behind Oregon Voices invites you to start or continue conversations where you live. How is K-12 education being discussed in your community? What support do local advocates need? And how are policies and legislation contributing to or detracting from a high-quality statewide education system? Together, we can work toward a robust and diverse K-12 education system that meets the needs of students, sets them up for success beyond high school, and meets the state's educational goals.

What trends do you notice in your community?

Visit orvoices.org to see what respondents in your county think about Oregon's education system. From the Oregon Voices homepage, navigate to "Explore the Data" where you can see survey results for topics related to this issue brief. Use the filters to explore some of the prompts below — or create your own research questions. Let us know what you're learning by emailing us at oregonvoices@tfff.org.

Community Infrastructure: What do respondents from your home county share about schools in their community? Choose a county different than your own. Are the results similar? What do you notice?

Community Concerns: Do respondents in your community seem to agree that schools are good in the communities where you live? What do you think? Is this the case in a neighboring county?

Demographics – Education: How many people in your community are students? What are the different educational attainment levels in your community?

¹⁷ Oregon Department of Education, *Quality Education Model*, 2022. oregon.gov/ode/reports-and-data/taskcomm/Documents/QEMReport_2022_VERSION2_Revised2_8_23.pdf

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Education, *Biden-Harris Administration Announces \$47 Million in New Funding to Support School Infrastructure Investments*, 2024. ed.gov/news/press-releases/biden-harris-administration-announces-47-million-new-funding-support-school-infrastructure-investments



For data summaries for each county in Oregon,
more research and to explore the data on your own, visit
orvoices.org.



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