

A photograph of the Florida State Capitol building in Tallahassee, Florida, viewed from a low angle looking up the steps. The building is a grand neoclassical structure with a prominent portico supported by tall columns and a large dome on top. The image is overlaid with a semi-transparent blue filter. A paved walkway leads up to the steps, flanked by flower beds and palm trees.

Florida Insights Review

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Executive Summary

From August to November 2020, we surveyed and spoke with state and local policymakers in Florida to understand how the government and private sector responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and what policymakers want to see from advocates during this time. This review examines what policymakers view as the most pressing issues in the state, followed by an in-depth look at two COVID-related topics.



Top Issues in Florida



Education

- A bipartisan majority of Florida policymakers perceive education in the face of COVID-19 as one of the most pressing issues in the state.



Public Health & Healthcare

- Bolstering public health capabilities (including increased testing and preparedness) ranks highest among policymaker priorities for combating COVID-19.
- Florida policymakers often discuss public health and safety in tandem with the health of the economy.



Environment

- Environmental disaster and recovery planning are bipartisan concerns.

Case Study on K-12 Education

- Policymakers highlight the need for greater investments in K-12 education in order to continue offering both remote and in-person learning.
- Policymakers identify four core areas of consideration as schools adapt to the pandemic: students' mental health and development, families' child care needs, broadband access, and food insecurity.

Business Response to COVID-19

- A bipartisan majority of policymakers believe the private sector's COVID response has been effective, but there are still opportunities for improvement.
- Looking forward, policymakers want businesses and associations to focus on safe return to work.

Top Issues in Florida

Top Issues in 2020

Florida policymakers across the political spectrum identify education, public health & healthcare, and the environment as three of the most pressing issues in the state.

Most Pressing Issues in the State

"As Florida looks to reopen communities and the economy, which of the following do you view as the most pressing issues facing the state? (Select up to 3.)"



n = 277

Education and Schools

Policymakers on both sides of the aisle agree that education is a top issue in Florida, especially in light of the challenges associated with schooling during COVID-19.

*"I think our school district has **tried to open as safely as possible**, with distancing and mixed schedules, and things like that. But **it's still quite challenging.**"*

-Mayor, D

*"I don't know how families are coping with it because they're sending their kids to school, but as a result, there's increased chance that they could contract the virus and bring it home, or spread it to someone else. **But if we stay home, then your kids are losing out on some of those educational opportunities.**"*

-Deputy Director,
Executive Agency, I

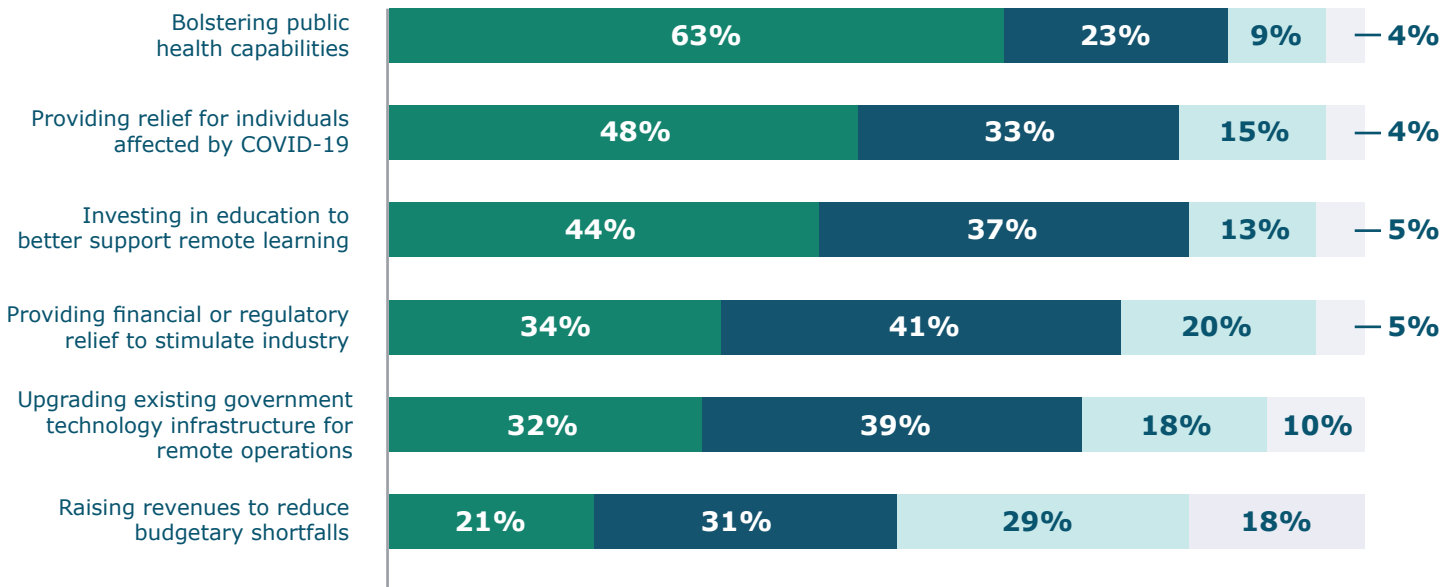
*"It's kind of a system of systems approach in dealing with education, whether it's virtual school, hybrid system, or in-school that relates to COVID. **It's tricky and it's juggling. And you absolutely can't please everybody.**"*

-Representative, R

Top Issues in 2020

Public Health & Healthcare

"In light of the COVID-19 crisis, which should the state prioritize?"



■ High priority
 ■ Somewhat of a priority
 ■ Neutral
■ Not really a priority/Not a priority at all

n = 335



Bolstering public health capabilities is a priority in Florida, especially in light of the pandemic, and public servants voice a desire to ensure citizens' safety while looking to jumpstart economic recovery efforts.

"The first priority is ensuring the health of our residents and returning to a safe community. A close second priority is the economic impact on our city: the closures of business, the impact on small business owners, job losses, and accessing unemployment benefits."

-Vice Mayor

Top Issues in 2020

Environment

Policymakers of both parties emphasize the importance of recovery planning for environmental disasters to ensure the safety of the state's residents. Policymakers also acknowledge that climate change is a particular concern for Floridians.

Environmental Disasters and Recovery Planning

*"A major legislative priority is disaster recovery: making sure that people are safe from hurricanes and have the infrastructure in place to mitigate those storms and recover. The Department of Emergency management has been dealing with climate change and natural disasters from Hurricane Michael, Hurricane Irma. I know the **different counties are trying to still recover from some of these storms.** This is going to be an extremely active -- and has already been an extremely active -- hurricane season."*

-Senior Staff, Executive Branch



Climate Change

"The environment, from a public policy perspective, is big. And now, we're starting to see a focus on sea-level change, and climate change, and what do we do with blue-green algae and red tide. They've started to talk about that stuff."

-Former Representative, R



"The changing climate is something that I view as our responsibility to manage. If you look at human beings in a timeframe of the geologic record, we barely make a mark. But we're changing our environment at such a dramatic rate that we are probably largely unwittingly changing the world in such a way that we may not possess the adaptations needed to survive as a species."

-Former Mayor, D

**Case Study:
Evaluating K-12 Education**

Case Study: Evaluating K-12 Education

Education was selected as one of the most pressing issues in the state of Florida by the largest share of respondents. Policymakers identified the need for greater investments in K-12 education, especially increased funding for both in-person and remote learning. Additionally, local leaders in Florida agreed that measures need to be taken to address the needs of vulnerable and underserved students, who may have been particularly affected by the pandemic.

Balancing Remote and In-Person Learning

In our conversations with Florida policymakers, pandemic-friendly education infrastructure was a key concern. For the 2020-21 academic year, Florida K-12 school systems offered both remote and in-person learning, the latter being mandated by Florida Education Commissioner Richard Corcoran.

On issues of K-12 education, Florida Democrats tend to focus on the need for additional funding and support for remote learning so that school districts can continue to offer this alternative. Florida Republicans tend to focus on the importance of offering in-person learning so that families can choose the method of learning that best suits their needs.

“Funding for a lot of Florida public schools is dependent upon how many students they physically have in the classroom. The state of Florida needs to provide alternative funding for online school.”

-Legislative Staff, D

“In my district and county-wide, we have different options that parents can choose: in-person, virtual, and hybrid. With local needs in mind, Governor DeSantis would not allow any school system to go 100% virtual.”

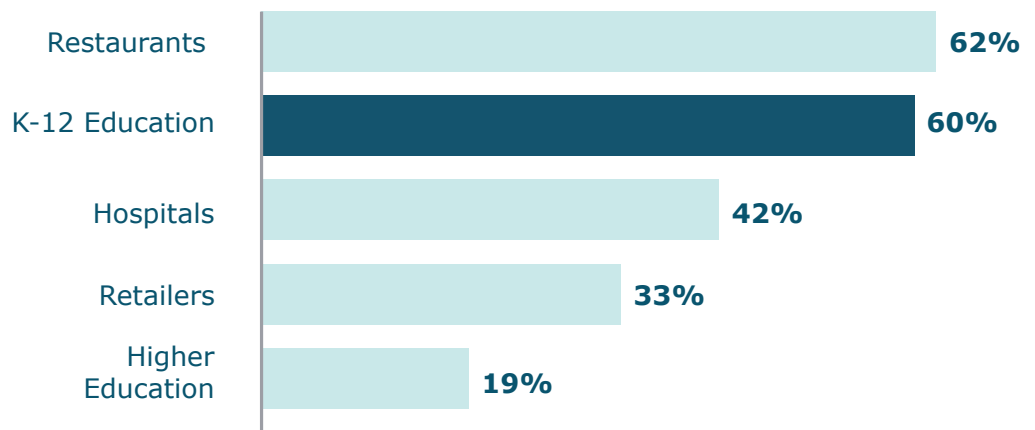
-Representative, R

Need for Increased Investments in K-12 Education

“Having a thousand in-person students fewer can mean losing millions upon millions of dollars for these districts. And that’s a really big deal. But I think that revisiting the mechanisms for that, or at least providing some kind of alternative funding scheme for online school is going to be a priority.”

-Senior Legislative Staff, D

“Which of the following impacted industries, if any, require financial support from the government right now? (Select up to 3.)”



n = 264

Case Study: Evaluating K-12 Education

Beyond logistics and finances, Florida policymakers voice concerns about the disproportionate impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the wellbeing of vulnerable and underserved students. Policymakers highlight four core areas of consideration as school systems adapt to learning during COVID-19.

Addressing Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Wellbeing of Underserved Students

Students' Mental Health and Development

*"I believe there's been small initiatives to help with mental health, but in general **there's already a crisis and I only see it getting worse for children in Florida.**"*

-Director, Executive Branch, I

*"An individual's brain is still in formation until you're somewhere in your early 20s...you're talking about a **whole generation of people that could be irreparably harmed** in some way by what's going on right now."*

-Representative, D

Families' Child Care Needs

*"Public schools do serve an important function. At the bare minimum, **they're a form of childcare for many working families**, so it is certainly something that we want to see open when possible."*

-Senior Legislative Staff, D

*"How do parents go back to work when they don't want their children back in brick and mortar schools yet? And many times it's the opposite of that. **They need their kids in brick and mortar schools because they need to go back to work.** Whether they want to or not, they have to."*

-Representative, R

Broadband Access

*"Some of these kids don't have computers, **they don't have Internet access**, and they're just falling through the cracks."*

-Senior Staff, Executive Branch, D

*"We had COVID, so we sent all these kids home. We said, 'Okay, we're going to learn online, and here's a laptop.' But then we hear, '**I don't have internet access. How do I educate my kid even if we've got a laptop?**' So now we're discovering all these gaps in broadband coverage."*

-Former Representative, R

Food Insecurity

*"The schools do a **big job of feeding children** in Florida."*

-Staff, Executive Agency, I

*"Food insecurity was already a pretty big issue in Florida: **one in five children were actually suffering from food insecurity. That's even more exacerbated now due to COVID-19.** A lot of students depend on school breakfasts and school lunches, whether that's known widely or not. But they depend on those meals in order to actually eat."*

-Staff, Executive Agency

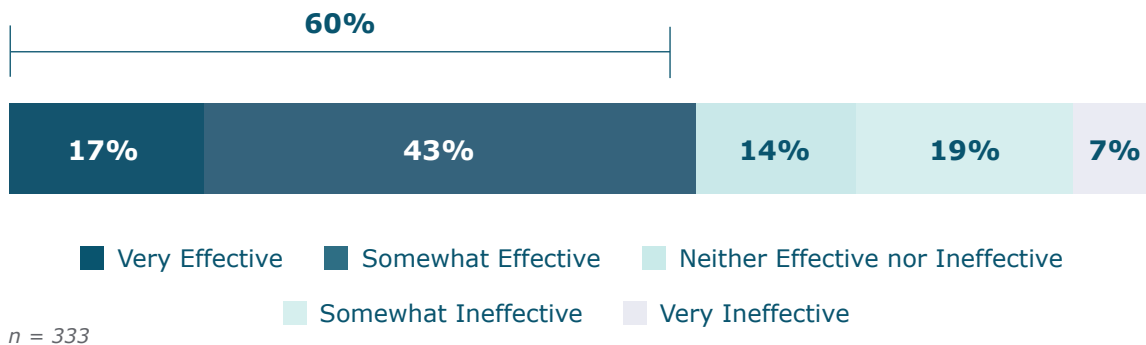
Business Response to COVID-19

Business Response to COVID-19

A majority of Florida policymakers across both parties believe that the private sector has been somewhat or very effective in tackling COVID-19 related issues.

Private Sector Effectiveness in Tackling COVID-19 Challenges

"In your view, how effective has the response of the private sector (e.g., businesses and associations) been in tackling COVID-19 challenges?"

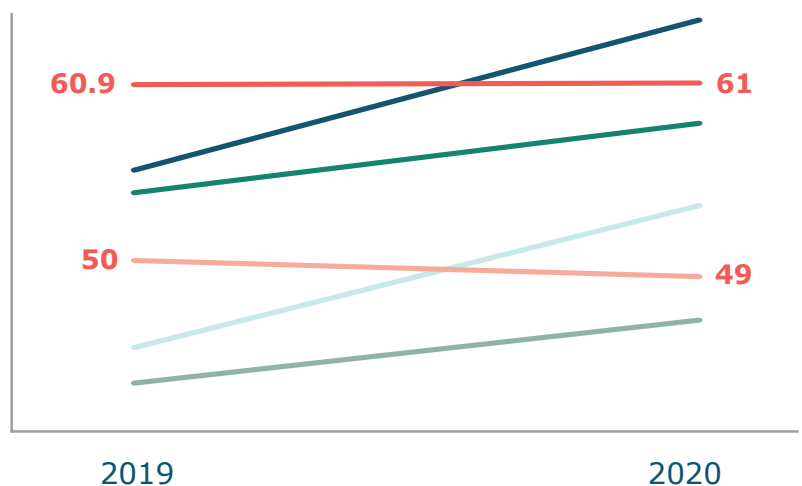


PBI* Scores for Corporations and Associations

Across states and at the federal level, Ballast tracks policy brand scores — our quantitative measure of reputation among policymakers — for corporations and associations. From 2019 to 2020, Florida policy brand scores remained stable, meaning that policymakers' overall perceptions of the private sector did not shift.

For comparison, in California and Ohio, policy brand scores increased by an average of 6.8 points for associations and by 6.35 points for corporations.

This lack of movement in Florida's scores suggests that there is still an opportunity for businesses and associations to improve their engagement with policymakers and their response to issues surrounding COVID-19.



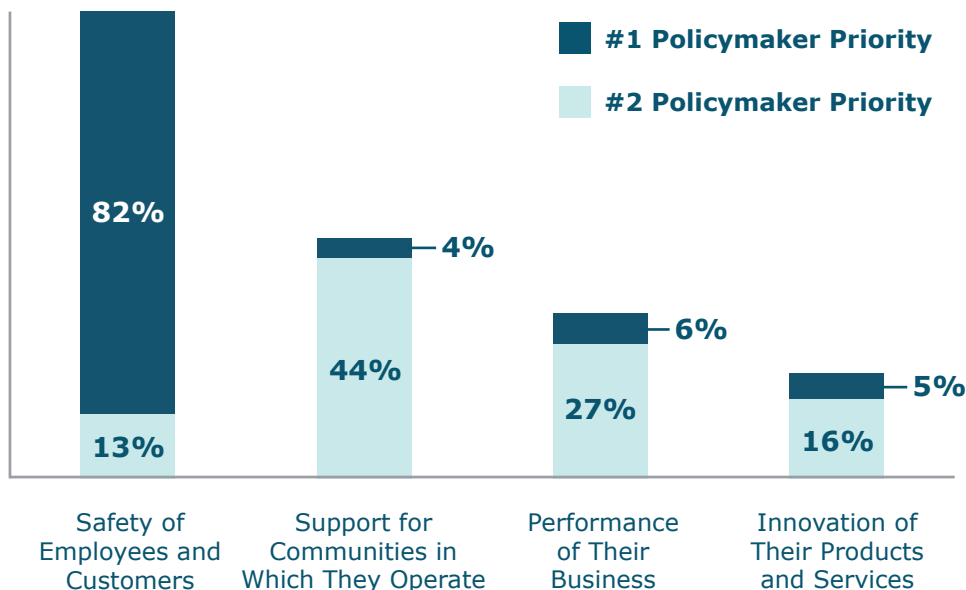
*The Policy Brand Index (PBI) is a combination of factors based on the four distinct measures of policy brand: Respect, Consideration, Influence, and Sharing.

■ FL Associations ■ CA Associations ■ OH Associations
■ FL Corporations ■ CA Corporations ■ OH Corporations

What Policymakers Want to See From the Private Sector

What to Focus on to Support State Recovery

“To support your state's recovery, what should businesses focus on?”



In the midst of COVID-19 recovery efforts, policymakers overwhelmingly believe that businesses' **top priority should be focusing on the safety of employees and customers.**

n = 249

Looking Forward

Moving forward, policymakers would like to hear more from businesses and associations about **safe return to work.**

“Keeping people safe in the workplace is number one. Getting people back into particular office buildings and other spaces where you’re uncertain about ventilation and how to get appropriate social distancing are real challenges.”

-Director, Executive Branch, D

“That was the priority from the beginning: first, ensuring the safety of the workers. And then, number two, to get the job done.”

-Manager, Executive Branch, I

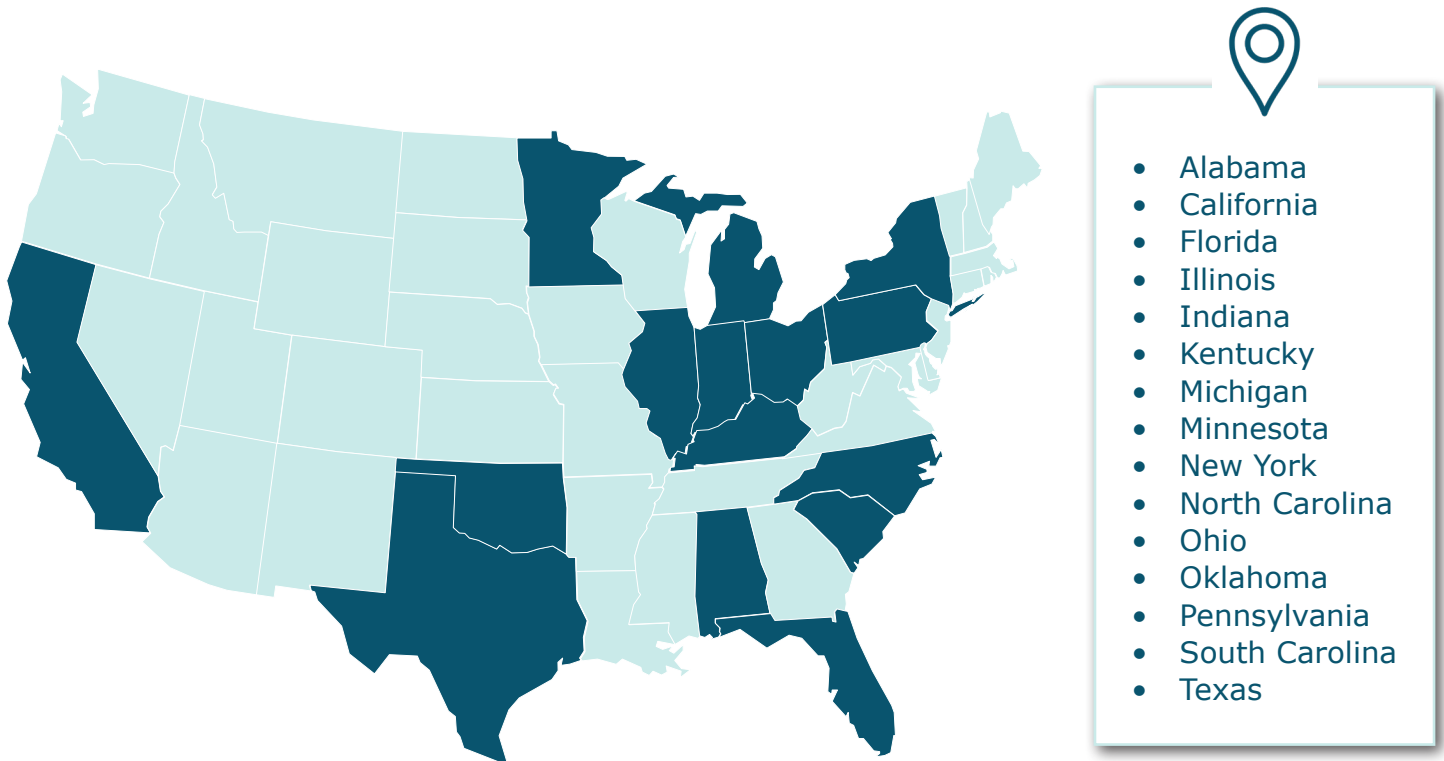
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States Insights Review**

States Insights Review

Ballast Research provides direct feedback from senior policymakers to government relations professionals, helping advocates make better use of policymakers' time and provide the resources most useful to those in government.



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