

Penta Policy Insiders

Florida Insights Review Series

K-12 Education

September 2023
policyinsiders.pentagroup.co

Executive summary

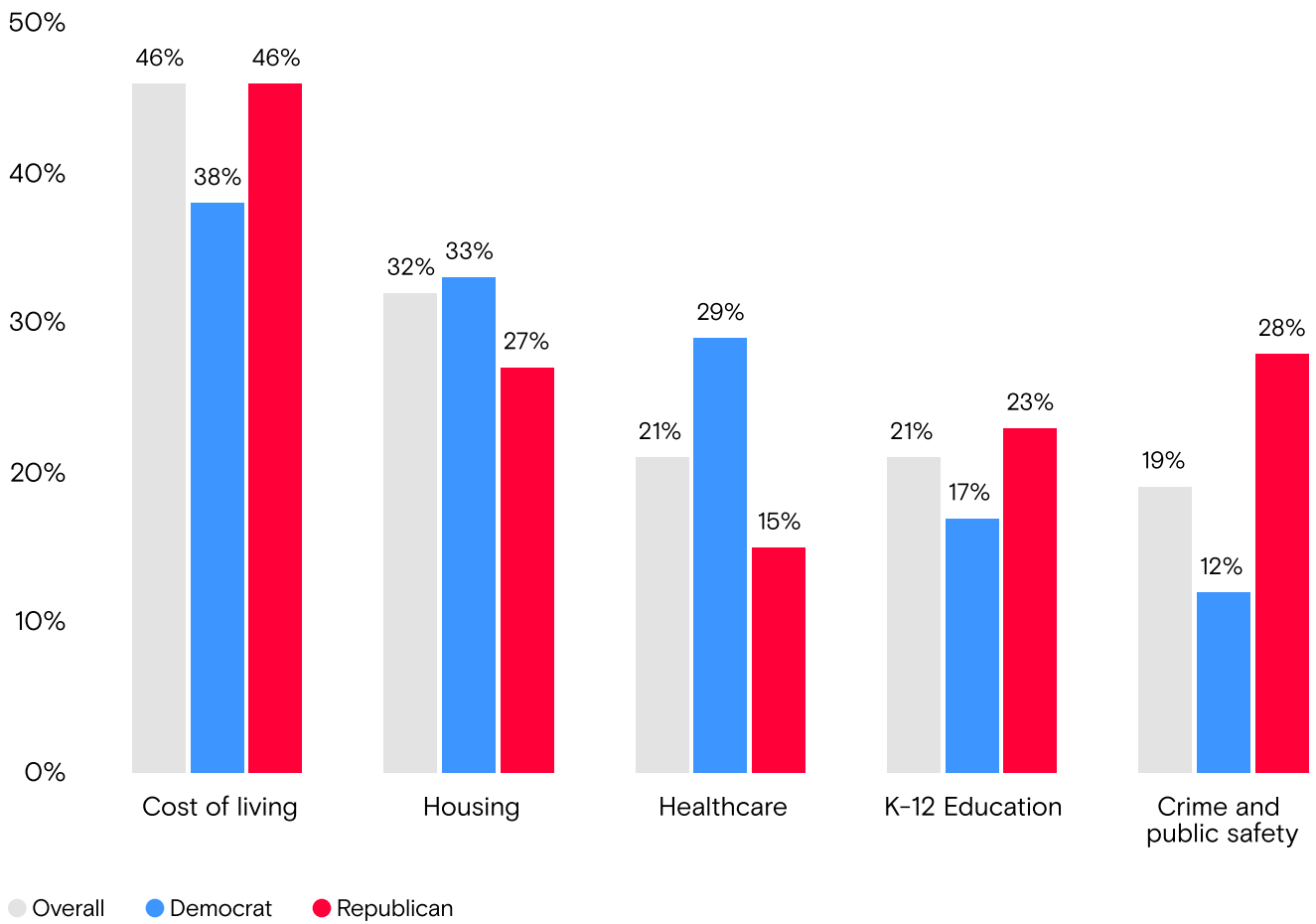
We are pleased to share our findings from this year's Florida Insights Review. From March to July 2023, we interviewed 292 policymakers in the state to learn about their policy priorities and top issues faced by communities across the state.

Cost of living is the top concern among Florida policymakers, with 46 percent of policymakers selecting it as leading priority. Additionally, 32 percent of policymakers cite housing to be a significant issue in the sunshine state, with policy staff on both sides of the aisle identifying challenges around affordable housing, homelessness, and high rental costs. Additionally, our research revealed healthcare and K-12 education as the other top priorities for policymakers and key influencers in Tallahassee and around Florida.

This report is fourth in a series that examines four of Florida Policymakers' top priorities, which include (i) Cost of Living (ii), Housing (iii), Healthcare, and (iv) K-12 Education.

Top policy priorities in Florida

Multiple selections permitted



Florida deep dive

K-12 Education

In March 2022, the “Parental Rights in Education” bill was signed into law in Florida. The legislation was intended to reinforce parents’ ability to decide what their children learn in school, and, among other things, prohibited the discussion of topics like gender, race, and sexual orientation in the classroom. Over the past two years, several other education bills have further limited discussion on such topics, in addition to restricting subjects covered in courses like AP Psychology and AP African American History.¹

These laws have fueled heated debate across the state on the role of government in the education system and what a high quality education actually looks like. Proponents argue that parental input on curriculum is necessary and will help protect kids from sensitive topics, while critics believe that such issues should be discussed and are vital to a comprehensive education.

This division can be seen clearest along party lines, with Democrats and Republicans landing firmly on different sides. Florida Republicans believe that such legislation will help “get back to basics” when it comes to the objectives of education, like proficiency in math and reading,² and Democrats state that such initiatives equate to censorship, discrimination, and identity erasure.^{3,4}

Navigating these new standards has proven to be a challenge for many school districts, and particularly for educators trying to understand, implement, and operate within these new constraints. Some schools have gone as far as to hire lawyers to help plan curriculum for the upcoming school year and protect themselves amidst new legislation.⁵

While education is top of mind for both political parties in the state of Florida, it is clear that the way Democrats and Republicans interpret this priority is vastly different. Republican and Democrat policy staff have markedly conflicting opinions on what the focus should be for Florida’s education agenda, and this has sparked concerns that Florida’s education system has become a battleground for the promotion of political ideology on either side of the aisle.⁶ The tension caused by these developments continues to escalate and remains at the forefront of policy conversations in Florida, causing challenges for policymakers, teachers, parents, and ultimately students.⁷



Public education is a volleyball that's being used by either the left or the right to push whatever their agenda happens to be. And for me personally, they're making all these changes, and the kids still can't read.

Specialist, Executive, R

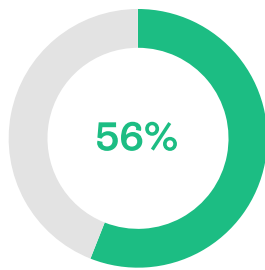


It's about the kids. To me, it's about the kids, and it's about families... It's about really truly caring for each child, and respecting our diversity.

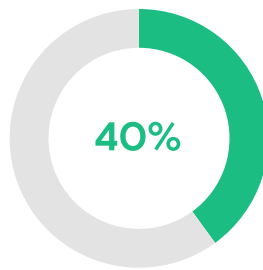
Mayor, Florida State Municipality, D

Top K-12 education priorities in Florida

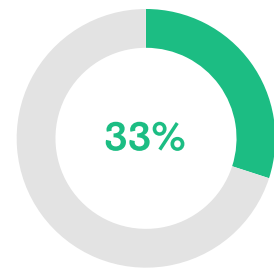
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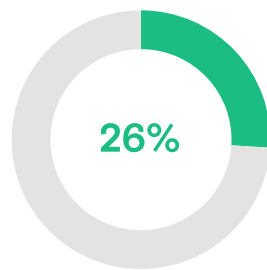
Teacher shortages



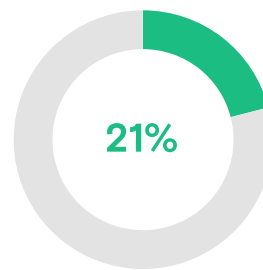
School safety



Student achievement



Funding



School choice

Teacher retention

Teachers are feeling the political tension more than ever, with many now having to navigate increased scrutiny and even legal strains while making decisions about their curricula. With a shortage of educators in the state already at an all time high, policy leaders are concerned that further pressures from a variety of factors, including inadequate compensation and new legislation, will continue to drive teachers away.⁸



Teacher pay continues to be a really big issue. And then I think one of the latest issues is just over politicization of education. So we've just seen a complete amplification of accusing teachers, indoctrination, and banning books. **There's a lot of concern, especially with my constituents of just how political education has become and how that's pushing out good teachers too.**

State Rep, Florida House of Representatives, D



I know many, many excellent teachers, teachers-of-the-year kind of teachers, in their schools that have left the industry because **they're under appreciated, under-compensated**, and they can't handle the administrative burden that's been put on them over the years. So they're out. And it's sad, and it's a **disservice to our children and our future here in Florida.** And I think that's another one of these big topics that has to be addressed.

Chief Commercial Officer, Private, I



I think there's been some nice improvements in teacher salaries, which is great. I think that **teachers have never been paid what they should be paid**. I think we're getting closer. Florida has been in the lower tier for many years. And now that we've moved up a couple of steps, I think that's great progress, but **definitely need a lot more progress in that direction**.

District Administrator, Executive, R



Legislation stifles how children are taught. It stifles teachers. It makes them afraid to teach anything about reality because they have to worry about if even a single student gets uncomfortable that they are going to get written up, called out, and potentially at this point, **there's going to be criminal penalties associated with some of these things...We're seeing an incredible exodus away from Florida. Teachers are leaving in droves**.

Legislative Analyst, Florida House of Representatives, D

Governing classroom curriculum

One of the major themes identified in our interviews with policymakers is the role of the government when it comes to what is being taught in Florida's classrooms. Much of the recent legislation has had a direct impact on what educators are putting - or not putting - into their course of instruction. For example, among the legislation passed last year was a bill that places constraints on the instruction of gender and sexuality - even allowing parents to request books and other educational materials be removed from schools.⁹ With teachers increasingly concerned about including certain materials in their classrooms, many are playing it safe and removing any and all books that could be deemed inappropriate under the new laws. In fact, in 2022, Florida ranked second in the country for the largest number of books removed from schools.¹⁰

The bans on topics related to gender, race, and sexuality have also had an effect on the curricula being put together by Florida teachers. The constraints around these specific topics have, for example, resulted in many schools restricting certain AP level courses, such as Psychology and African American Studies due to their discussion of banned topics. While teachers are attempting to adhere to new regulations, there are ongoing concerns from parents, educators, and policymakers about how much influence, if any, policy should have on what is taught at school.¹¹



I think the most important policy area right now is a more broad thing, which is, I guess, **the preservation of independence and freedom for teachers, students, parents** - we're in this arena of ever-narrowing rights and freedoms in our state. I mean, **our state is basically in a culture war. It's just been really disheartening this year**.

Legislative Analyst, Florida House of Representatives, D



I believe that right now, there's a concerted effort to control what kids learn in schools and to mold their minds in a certain way. And it's extremely concerning to me... The state of Florida has passed all sorts of different laws restricting what can be taught, forcing curriculums to the schools and trying to enforce a mindset upon people. **And I think that's absolutely the antithesis of what schools should be.**

Director, Executive, D



I'm just concerned about the whitewashing of history and our schools banning books just based on one parent saying, 'Oh, that book makes me uncomfortable,' so then it's banned. I mean, I just—I think in a **free America, a constitutional, democratic America**, these things shouldn't be happening.

Vice Mayor, Florida State Municipality, Other



There's a very strong appetite for parental choice in Florida and parental freedom. Basically, parents being able to know what their kids are seeing in the classrooms, parents knowing that in the classrooms their kids are being taught the ABCs and 123s, not necessarily the LGBTs. So that's definitely a strong pressing thing, especially in a Florida supermajority where they've won a lot of parental access and parental freedom to know what their children are studying.

Legislative Aide, Florida State Senate, R



I think the most pressing issue is mostly philosophical and that is **returning as much control to parents as possible** and breaking, sort of, the monopoly that government schools seem to have on education and stopping the indoctrination of students.

State Rep, Florida House of Representatives, R



Is school choice the right choice?

In passing House Bill Number 1 earlier this year, Florida joined a handful of other states in offering universal school choice for students. This legislation made a number of updates to the school voucher system, including eliminating income eligibility requirements. While school vouchers will still go to lower income households first, everyone in Florida is now eligible to enroll in the school of their choice. Some policy staff worry that expanding the voucher program will negatively impact funding for traditional public schools by making them less competitive. Supporters argue it will drive up competition, thus improving the quality of all K-12 schools in the state, while also giving parents more freedom to choose where to send their kids to school.¹²



I think Florida, with HB 1, I think it was a great, great deal for our state. **We're looking forward to that, the voucher system for every student.** I think that's a great, great avenue for our state, and **it will definitely keep these schools competitive.**

State Rep, Florida House of Representatives, R



I think there's a future in Florida where we don't have two competing public education systems that are fighting with each other for the same dollars. And we're instead doing our best to **empower all the students to get the resources they need to succeed.**

Staff Director, Florida House of Representatives, D



Public education has historically been a priority for our caucus. And it's not just a policy priority, it is a constitutional command in the Florida Legislature. And the efforts that folks have had at **privatizing it and selling it off as a parental choice or any number of other things is a concern that we have. We want to make sure that our students succeed and that we have a system that's going to help them succeed.** And that continues to be a priority for us.

Staff Director, Florida House of Representatives, D



I think the notion of parental choice is important, and I think that helps, because generally speaking, parents want the best for their children. So they will try to find schools that would provide a good education.. **a lot of the public schools have failed us or are not living up to what they should, given the resources they've been given.**

Associate VP, Private, R

Conclusion

The ongoing regulatory changes to Florida's education systems have left parents, teachers, and policymakers at odds on how to move forward in a way that will be most beneficial to students. Recent legislation has created a wide range of questions for all stakeholders, particularly when it comes to appropriate classroom content and parental choice as a factor for creating curriculums. Moreover, the staunch differences in policy staff opinions across party lines about the best course of action has created a heightened partisan landscape for K-12 education in Florida. Unless Democrats and Republicans are able to find common ground, this strain will likely persist and prevent policy leaders from working together to create a system that will prioritize safe and high-quality education in the state.



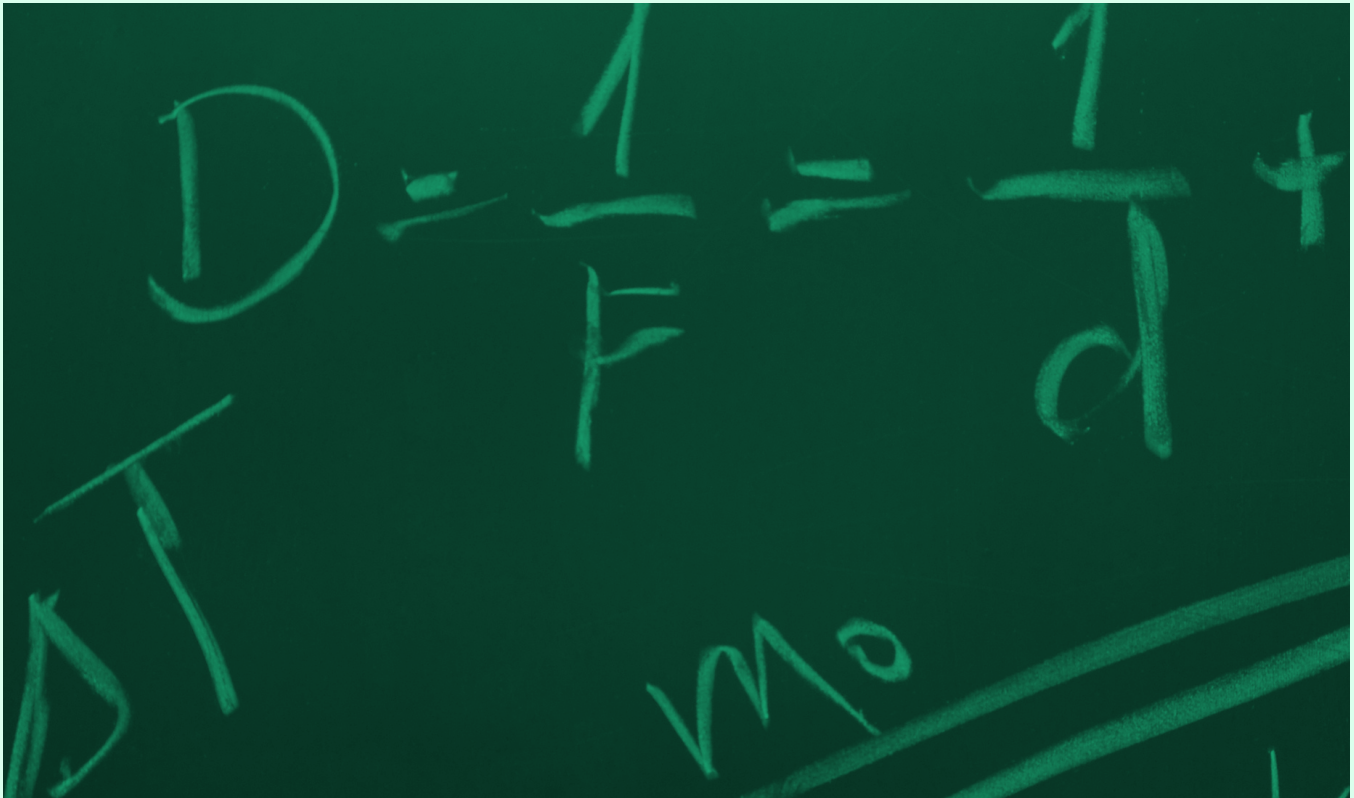
Everyone agrees that we want our kids safe at school, but the parties differ dramatically in the way that they think that should happen and what they think the causes of those problems are... I think some of those gaps can never be bridged, but maybe we can focus on other things.

State Rep, Florida House of Representatives, R



Potential opportunities for bipartisan engagement? Reevaluating teacher salary. Creating an unbiased agency to review curriculum... just reevaluating that structure. Funding, equitable funding.

District Aide, Florida House of Representatives, D



About Penta Policy Insiders

Penta Policy Insiders provides direct feedback from policymakers to government relations professionals, improving advocates' ability to understand, validate, and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their engagement.

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Citation

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