

2026

17th Annual

The Great Work of Montana's Public Schools

Volume XVII | October 2026

coalitionofmtk12advocates.org

coalition of advocates
FOR MONTANA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

MASBO | MREA | MTSBA | MQEC | SAM

SEVENTEEN YEARS OF LISTENING TO MONTANANS

Each year, the Coalition of Advocates for Montana's Public Schools conducts a comprehensive poll of likely voters to better understand what Montanans expect from their public schools. This annual effort helps identify the priorities, values and concerns of the people our schools serve and advances the People's constitutional goal "to develop the full educational potential of each person."

This is our 17th year of listening.

Over seventeen years, our polling has become more than a snapshot of public opinion. These surveys help us understand what Montanans consistently value, where perspectives and expectations are changing, and what our public schools must do to remain responsive to the children, families and communities they serve.

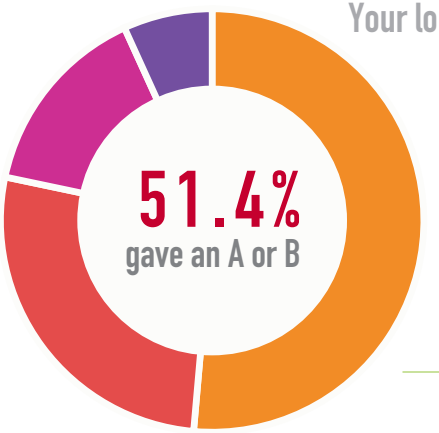
The 2026 results point toward a public education system that is both strong and adaptable: adequately supported, nonpartisan and locally led, accountable to the public, connected to families, and increasingly capable of providing each child the educational opportunities needed to thrive in a changing Montana.

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The closer people are to their schools, the more they trust and like them.

WHAT GRADE, A through F, would you give public schools in:

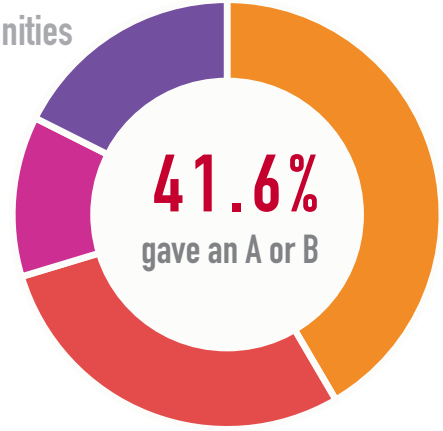
Your local community



A/B	51.4%
C	26.9%
D/F	14.9%
Not sure	6.8%

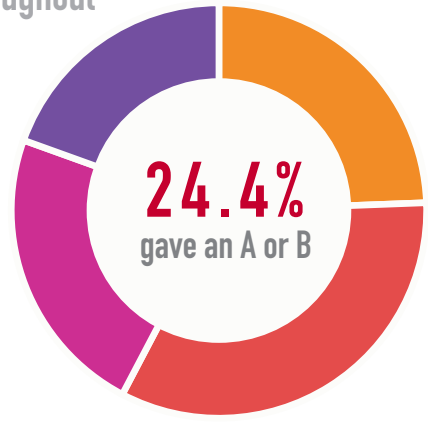
Other Montana communities

A/B	41.6%
C	28.8%
D/F	12.1%
Not sure	17.6%



Other states throughout the nation

A/B	24.4%
C	33.3%
D/F	22.8%
Not sure	19.5%



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TRUST BEGINS CLOSE TO HOME

Montanans continue to view the public schools closest to them most favorably.

More than half give the public schools in their own community an A or B, compared with fewer for schools elsewhere in Montana and fewer still for public schools nationally.

That pattern matters.

Public education is not an abstraction experienced from Helena or Washington, D.C. It is experienced through a child's school, educators, classmates, family and community.

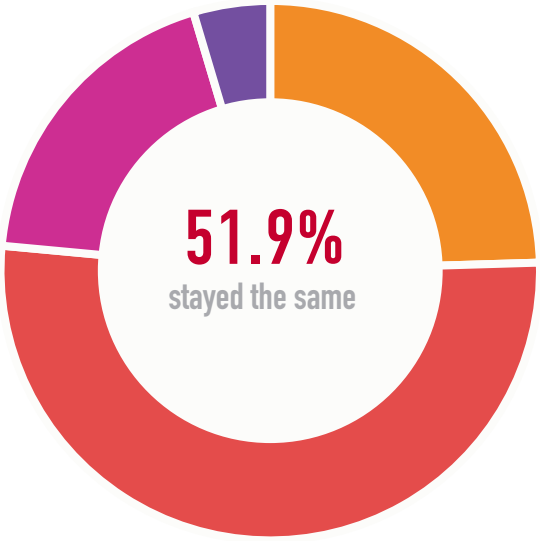
Montana's privilege and opportunity is to build outward from that local strength – keeping children connected to their communities while also connecting through their local public school to a wider world of educational opportunity.

Keep the connection local. Expand the opportunity.

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The importance of quality public schools:

Thinking about the past year, has your opinion about the importance of quality K-12 public schools in your community become more positive, stayed the same, or become more negative?



More positive	**24.5%**
Stayed the same	**51.9%**
More negative	**18.9%**
Not sure	**4.6%**

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PUBLIC SCHOOLS REMAIN ESSENTIAL TO MONTANA COMMUNITIES

Well rounded, quality public schools remain deeply important to Montanans. They are places where children learn, families connect, communities gather and the next generation prepares for citizenship, further education and work.

That enduring importance does not mean public schools should stand still.

It gives them a foundation from which to evolve.

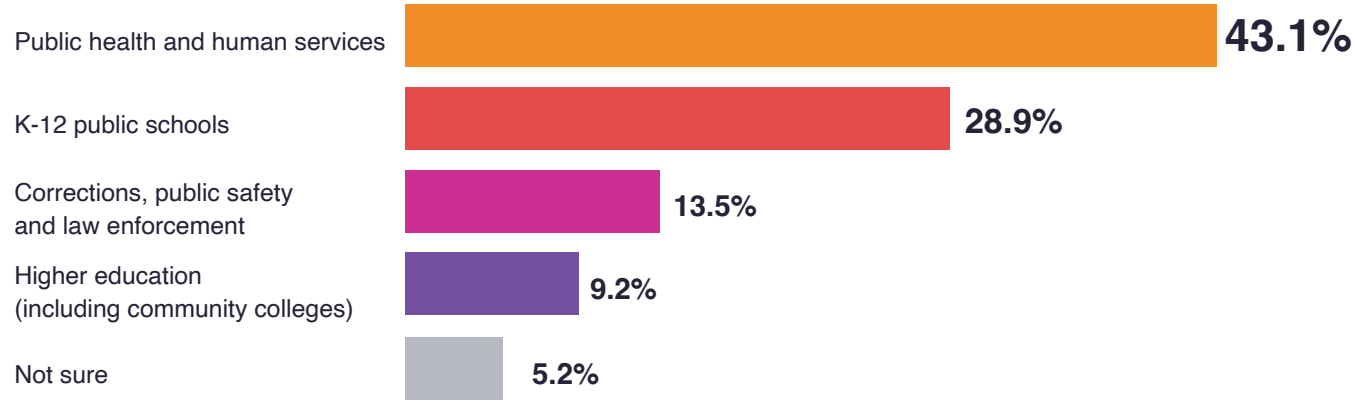
The public school of Montana's future should remain firmly rooted in its community while becoming increasingly capable of connecting each child to the learning, people, programs and experiences that can develop that child's full educational potential.

ROOTED IN COMMUNITY. CONNECTED TO OPPORTUNITY.

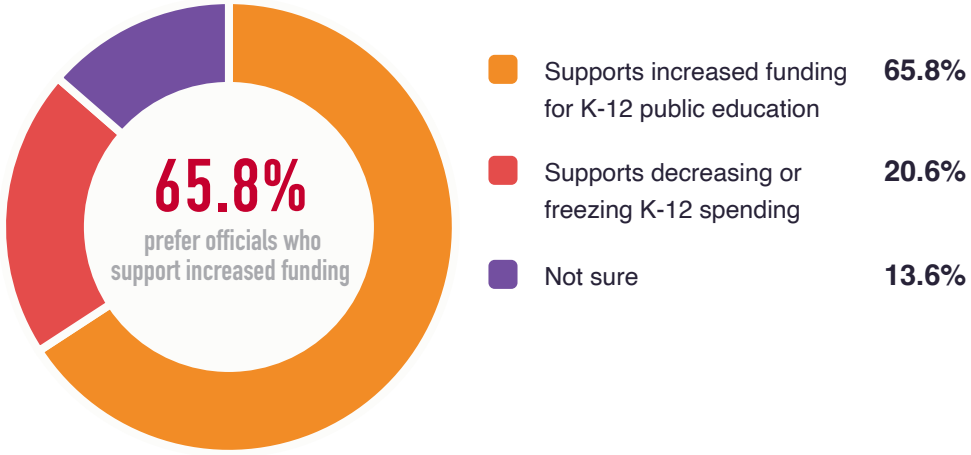
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Where should state dollars go first?

When it comes to how state government spends your tax dollars, which of the following areas do you think should be the highest priority?



Please tell us which type of legislator or other state elected official you most support?



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STRONG PUBLIC SCHOOLS REQUIRE THE CAPACITY TO SUCCEED

Montanans continue to recognize that strong public schools require public investment. Nearly two-thirds prefer elected officials who support increased funding for K-12 public education.

But funding is ultimately about what that investment makes possible.

It means excellent educators. Safe and effective schools. Modern technology and instructional resources. Programs responsive to students with different needs. Career and technical education. Advanced learning. And the capacity to connect children with opportunities that may extend beyond a single classroom, school or community.

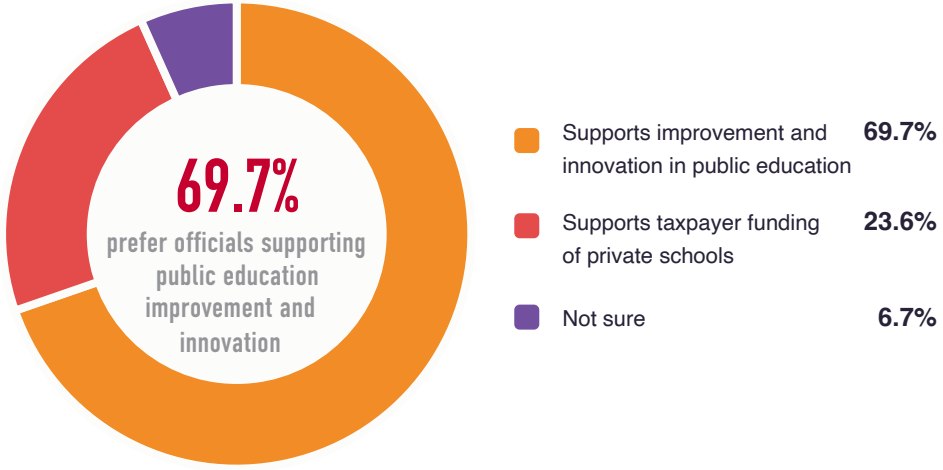
The goal is not simply to fund a system. It is to ensure that every Montana public school has the capacity to deliver for every child.

CAPACITY FOR EVERY SCHOOL. OPPORTUNITY FOR EACH CHILD.

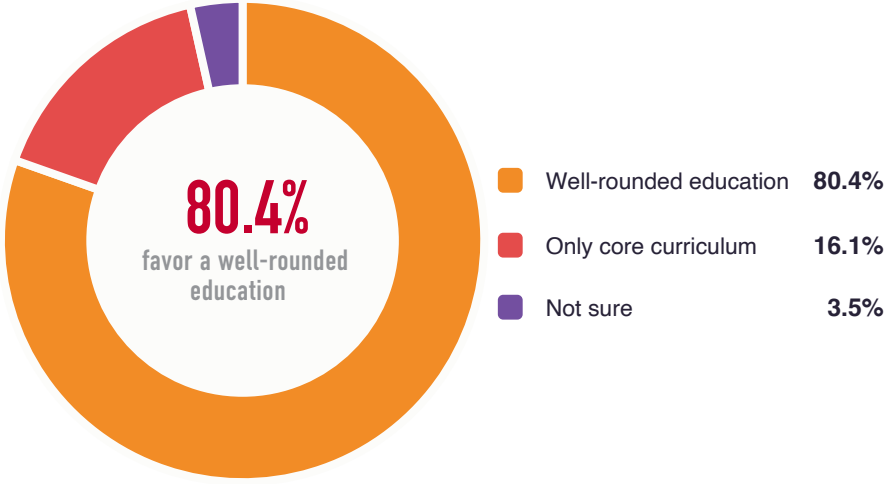
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Which education priorities win support?

Please tell us which type of legislator or other state elected official you most support?



In your opinion, should public schools provide a well-rounded education to all children, *including items such as early childhood education beginning at age 4, gifted and talented, music, art, physical education, technology, career and technical education and advanced placement courses or should public schools provide only core curriculum (math, English, science, social studies)?*



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MONTANANS WANT BOTH EXCELLENCE AND INNOVATION

Montanans are asking their public schools to do two things at once: provide a well-rounded education and continue to improve and innovate.

Those expectations belong together.

A modern public education can provide rigorous academics alongside career and technical education, advanced coursework, the arts, technology, dual credit, work-based learning and other experiences responsive to a student's abilities, interests and aspirations.

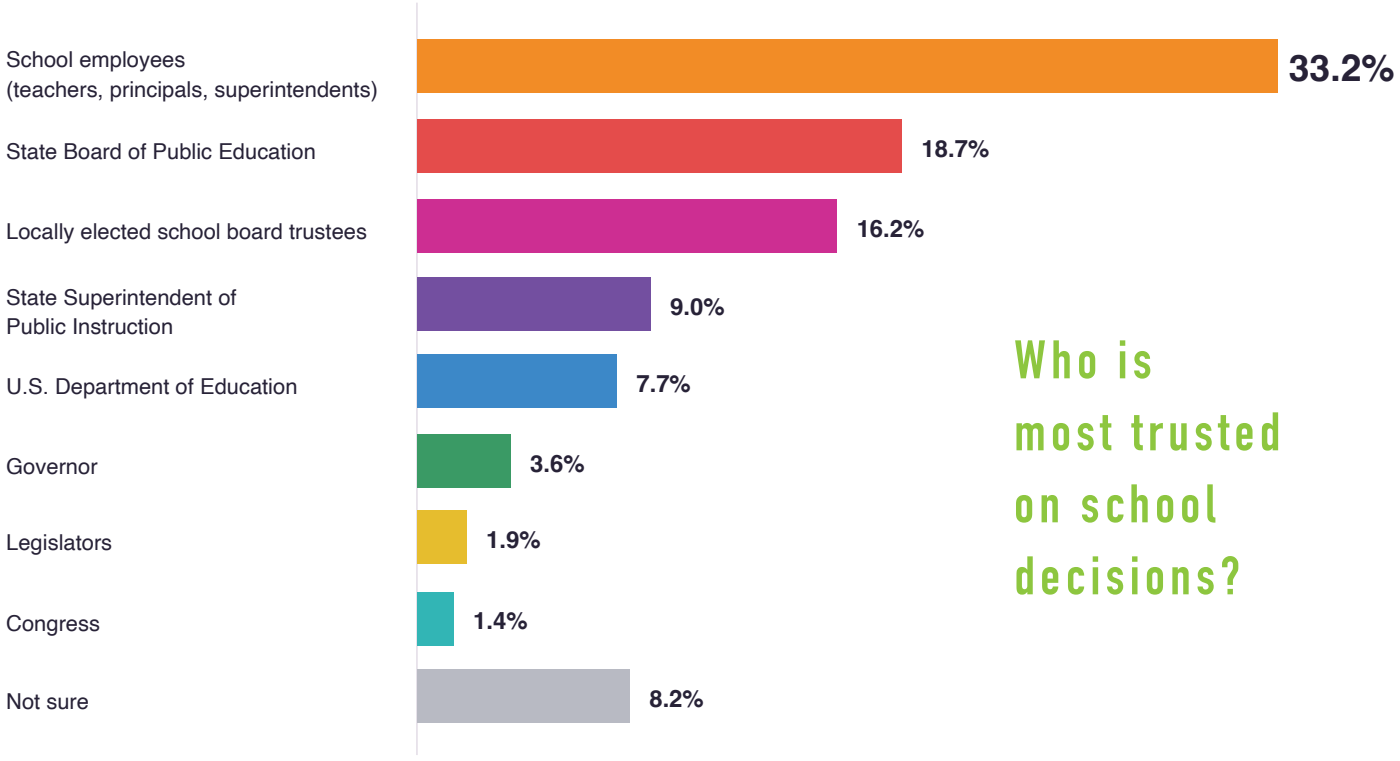
Innovation should be used to expand opportunities available to children.

The future of Montana public education lies in making more pathways available to more students while preserving the local relationships and public accountability Montanans value.

INNOVATION TO EXPAND OPPORTUNITY

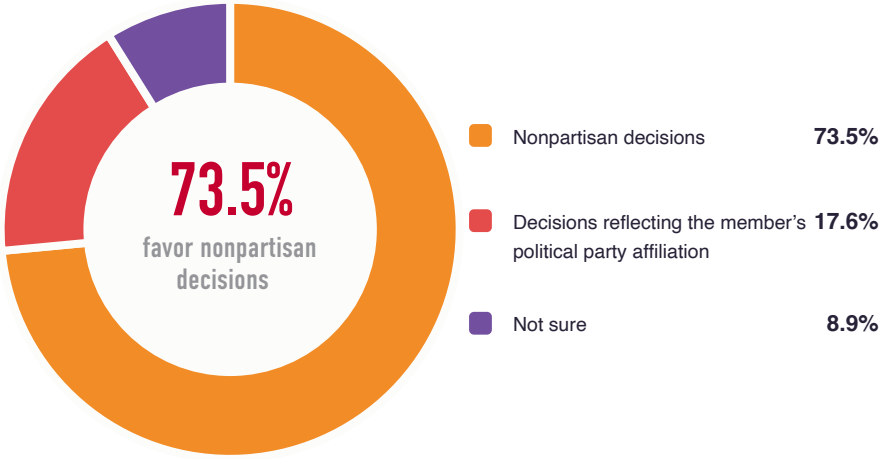
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Who among the following public employees and officials do you trust the most when it comes to deciding what is best academically for students in Montana's public schools?



Who is most trusted on school decisions?

Do you believe an elected school board member should make nonpartisan decisions ***OR*** do you believe an elected school board member should make decisions that reflect the school board member's political party affiliation?



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KEEP EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP CLOSE TO STUDENTS

Montana voters place their greatest academic trust in the educators and educational leaders closest to students, and they strongly prefer school board decisions to be made on a nonpartisan basis.

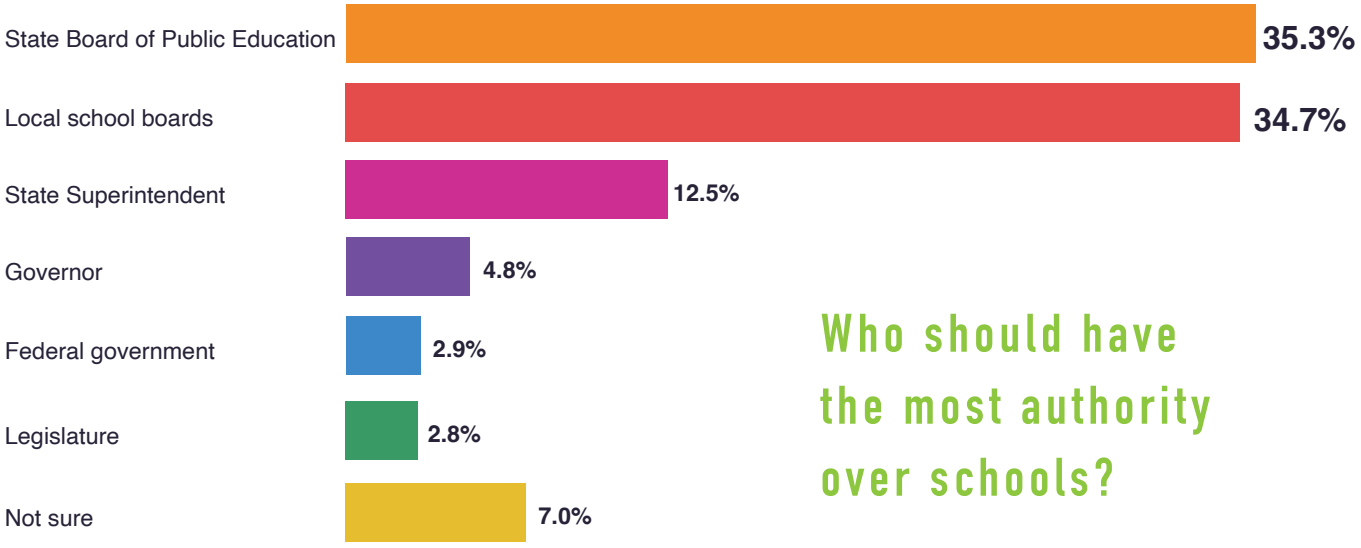
That trust carries responsibility.

Local educational leaders must know the children they serve, listen to families, understand the opportunities available to students and use the flexibility Montana provides to respond to individual needs and aspirations. Local leadership matters most when it is used to expand opportunity for children.

LOCAL LEADERSHIP. INDIVIDUAL OPPORTUNITY.

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Which of the following public officials do you think should have the most authority to determine how public schools are operated?



Who should have the most authority over schools?

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STATE RESPONSIBILITY. LOCAL LEADERSHIP. A SHARED PURPOSE.

Montana voters place substantial authority in both the State Board of Public Education and locally elected school boards - a result that reflects the shared state and local responsibility embedded in Montana's system of public education.

That partnership is a source of strength.

Statewide expectations and support help ensure quality and equality of educational opportunity across Montana. Locally elected trustees provide the leadership necessary to translate those commitments into educational opportunities responsive to the children, families and communities they serve.

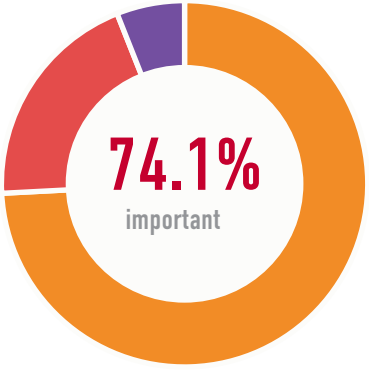
The purpose at every level should remain the same: developing the full educational potential of each child.

STATE AND LOCAL PARTNERSHIP

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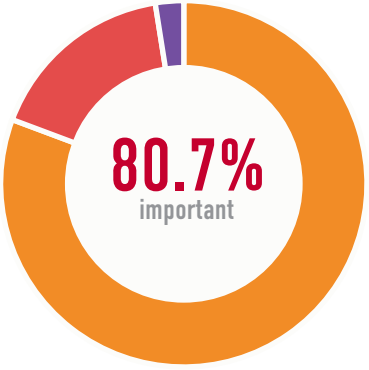
Please indicate your opinion of the importance of the following characteristics of public schools.

Equitable



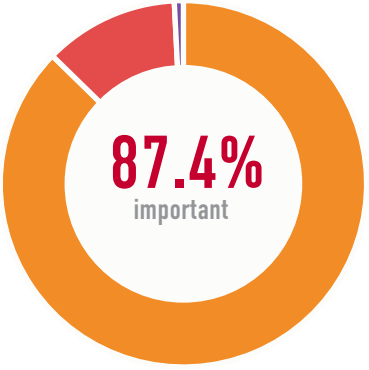
Important	74.1%
Unimportant	19.8%
Not sure	6.0%

Socially and Emotionally Supportive



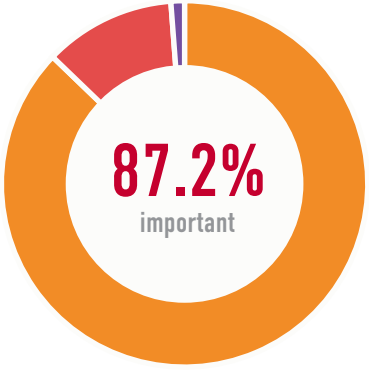
Important	80.7%
Unimportant	16.8%
Not sure	2.5%

Safe



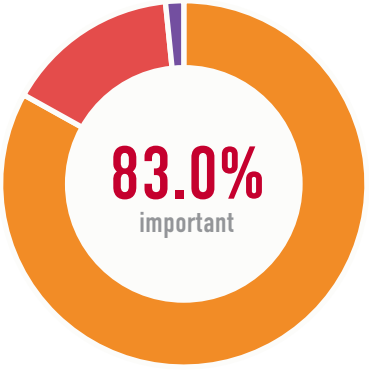
Important	87.4%
Unimportant	11.9%
Not sure	0.8%

Collaborative with families



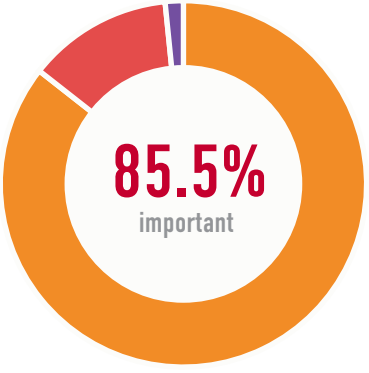
Important	87.2%
Unimportant	11.6%
Not sure	1.2%

Supportive of School Employees



Important	83.0%
Unimportant	15.3%
Not sure	1.6%

Academically Excellent



Important	85.5%
Unimportant	12.8%
Not sure	1.6%

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MONTANANS ARE TELLING US WHAT A QUALITY PUBLIC SCHOOL LOOKS LIKE IN EACH COMMUNITY.

These are not competing expectations. Together, they describe the public school Montanans want.

Voters expect schools to be safe and academically excellent. They expect schools to collaborate with families, support excellent educators, respond to the needs of children and provide equitable educational opportunity.

Meeting all of those expectations requires two things at the same time:

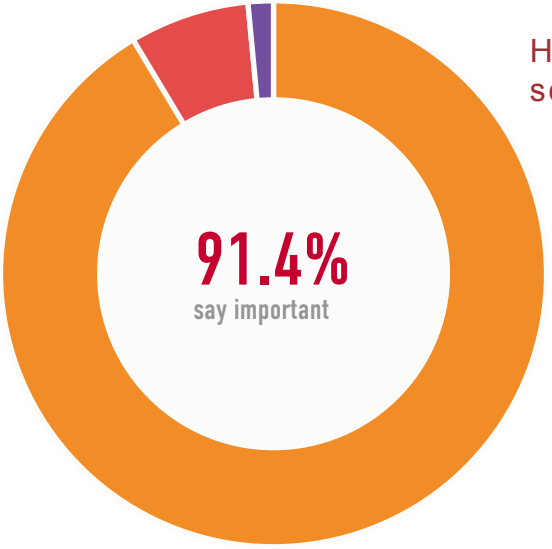
Capacity – the people and resources necessary to provide a quality education.

Opportunity – the flexibility and connectivity necessary to respond to individual children.

Montana's future public education system must provide both.

CAPACITY FOR EVERY SCHOOL. OPPORTUNITY FOR EACH CHILD.

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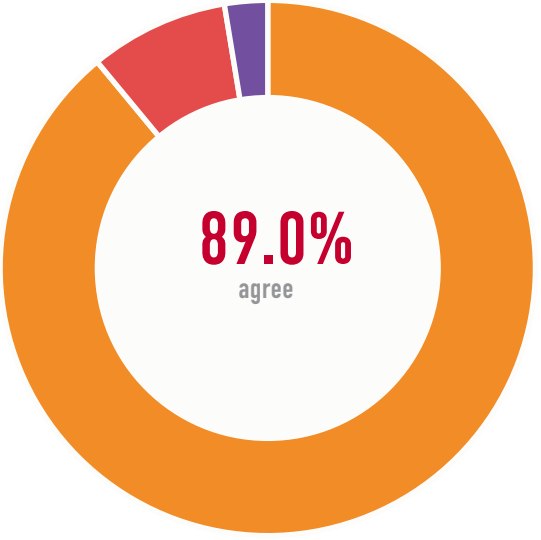
How important is having quality K-12 public schools operating in your community?

Important combined	**91.4%**
Unimportant combined	**7.1%**
Not sure	**1.5%**

Same standards for tax-funded private schools?

Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

Private K-12 schools that receive full or partial funding from tax revenues **should be required to meet** the same student testing, transparency, and reporting standards as public schools.



Agree	**89.0%**
Disagree	**8.4%**
Not sure	**2.6%**

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PUBLIC SUPPORT COMES WITH PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

Nine in ten Montana voters say quality K-12 public schools are important to their communities. An equally strong majority believes that private schools receiving public tax dollars should meet the same expectations for student testing, transparency and reporting as public schools.

Those findings belong together.

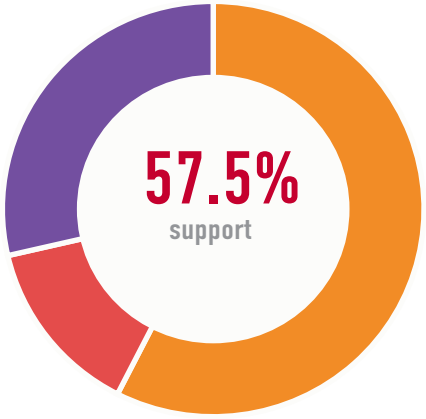
Public education earns its special place in Montana communities through both the opportunities it provides and its accountability to the public it serves.

Public investment, public accountability and educational opportunity should travel together.

PUBLIC SUPPORT REQUIRES PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY

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How do you view local school levy elections as a general principle?



Support	57.5%
Oppose	13.9%
It depends on the issue	28.6%

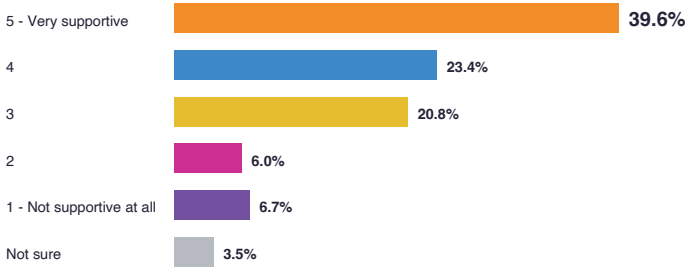
Which types of school levies are people likely to support?

Ratings from 1 (not supportive at all) to 5 (very supportive)

Operations

Salaries, benefits, supplies, and utilities

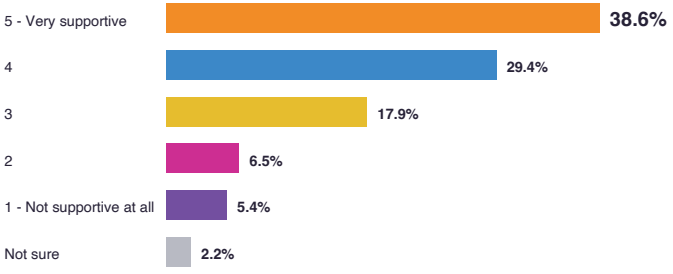
63.0% selected 4 or 5



Safety

Infrastructure and programs related to safety

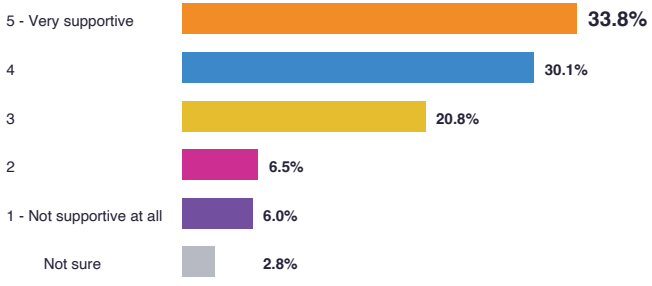
68.0% selected 4 or 5



Technology

Hardware, software, infrastructure, and staffing

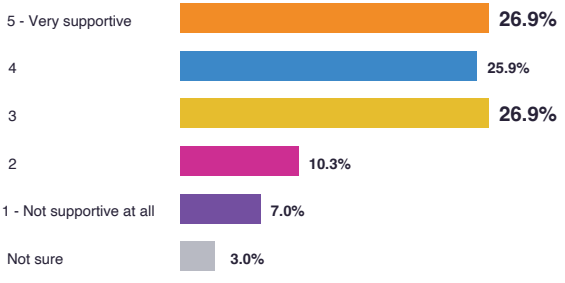
63.9% selected 4 or 5



Buildings and Maintenance

A specific building, construction, or maintenance project

52.8% selected 4 or 5



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LOCAL CHOICE SHOULD REMAIN MEANINGFUL

Montanans continue to support local investment in their schools, particularly when they can see the connection between that investment and the needs of students and communities.

Local choice is an important part of Montana public education and should remain meaningful.

At the same time, the quality of a child's basic educational opportunity should not depend on the taxable wealth of the community in which that child happens to live.

A strong statewide funding foundation and meaningful local decision-making can – and should – exist together.

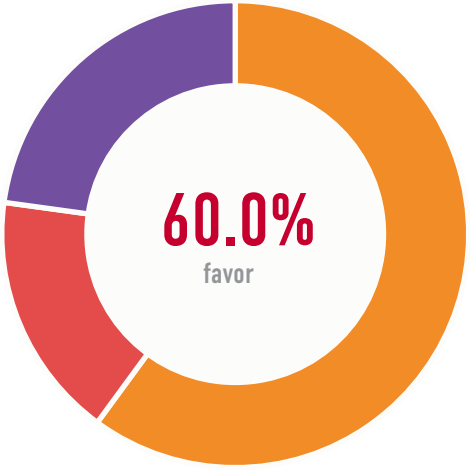
The state can carry its responsibility for an adequate and equitable system while communities retain the ability to invest locally in the priorities and enhancements they value.

A STRONG STATEWIDE FOUNDATION PAIRED WITH MEANINGFUL LOCAL CHOICE.

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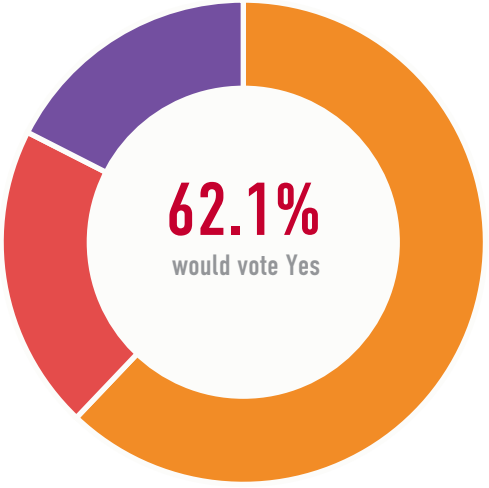
A statewide system for school operating costs?

In general, would you favor or oppose replacing all school district general fund property taxes and replacing them with a statewide system for funding the general operating costs of Montana public schools?



Favor combined	**60.0%**
Oppose combined	**17.1%**
Not sure	**22.8%**

If the election were held today, would you vote YES or NO on a statutory initiative that would replace all school district general fund property taxes and replace them with a statewide system for funding the general operating costs of Montana public schools? *The initiative would impose a 1% tax on income, while exempting lower-income taxpayers. Revenue generated by the tax would be dedicated by law to funding public schools and providing property tax relief.*



Yes combined	**62.1%**
No combined	**20.4%**
Undecided / Not sure	**17.5%**

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MONTANANS ARE READY TO TALK ABOUT A DIFFERENT WAY TO FUND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The 2026 results point toward an important public conversation about how Montana funds its public schools.

Six in ten voters favor replacing school district general fund property taxes with a statewide system for funding general operating costs. When voters were asked about a specific proposal pairing statewide school funding and property tax relief with a 1% tax on income that exempts lower-income taxpayers, more than six in ten said they would vote yes.

The underlying principle is consequential.

Providing every Montana child with a quality educational opportunity is a statewide responsibility.

A funding system less dependent on differences in local property wealth can strengthen educational equity while also addressing the property-tax burden carried by Montana communities.

EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY IS A STATEWIDE RESPONSIBILITY.

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SEVENTEEN YEARS OF LISTENING.
THE FUTURE IS COMING INTO FOCUS.

For seventeen years, Montanans have helped tell us what they expect from their public schools.

The message in 2026 is both familiar and forward-looking.

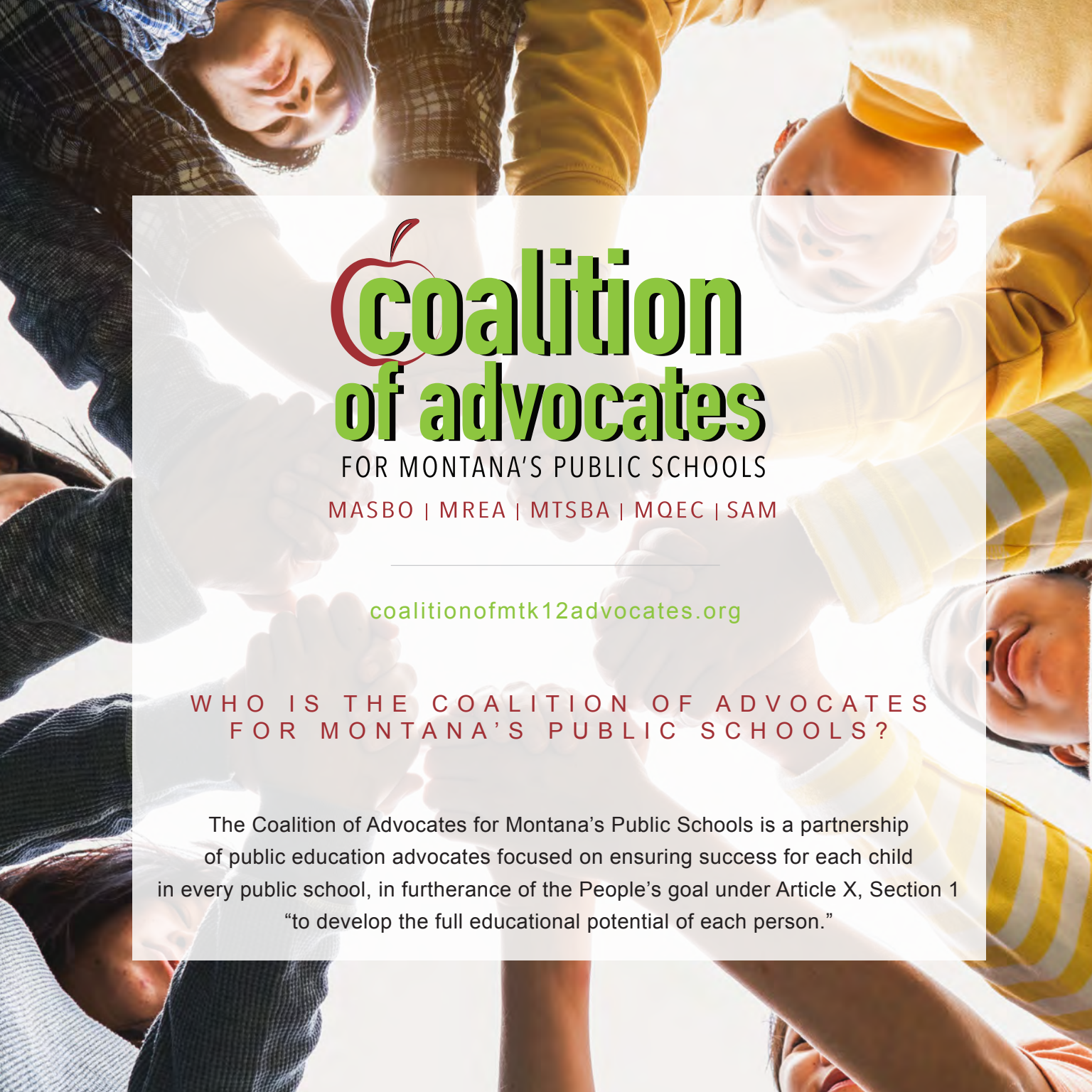
Montanans value strong local public schools.

They expect academic excellence, safety, accountability and partnership with families. They support investment in public education while expecting that investment to produce results. They value local leadership while recognizing a statewide responsibility for educational opportunity. And they want public schools to continue improving, innovating and responding to the individual needs and aspirations of children.

The opportunity before Montana is to put those expectations together.

THE GREAT WORK OF MONTANA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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coalition of advocates

FOR MONTANA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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WHO IS THE COALITION OF ADVOCATES FOR MONTANA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS?

The Coalition of Advocates for Montana's Public Schools is a partnership of public education advocates focused on ensuring success for each child in every public school, in furtherance of the People's goal under Article X, Section 1 "to develop the full educational potential of each person."