

Strong Parental Support for Balance, Not Bias, and Parental Involvement in K-12 Classrooms

Paige MacPherson



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Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction	2
Details on Polling Methodology	3
Parental Support for Facts-Based Curricula	4
Controversial Issues in K-12 Classrooms	6
Age-Appropriate Material and Discussions in K-12 Classrooms	8
Parental Consent Regarding Controversial Classroom Topics	10
Parental Right to Remove Children from Specific Controversial Classroom Topics	12
Why Do Some Parents Oppose the Idea of Other Parents Removing their Child from Specific Controversial Lessons?	14
Conclusion	15
References	16
About the Author	17
Publishing Information	18
About the Fraser Institute	19
Editorial Advisory Board	20

Executive Summary

- A new survey shows parents with kids in K-12 schools across Canada value balance over bias in classrooms and underscores the importance of parental involvement and consent.
- Eighty-six percent of parents believe teachers and curriculum in K-12 should focus on providing students with facts, and a learning environment within which students can openly explore facts.
- According to 76% of parents, students should be presented both sides of controversial issues, or they should be avoided entirely.
- Ninety-one percent of parents believe classroom material and discussions should always be age-appropriate.
- More than four in five (81%) parents with kids in K-12 schools believe that schools should provide advance notice of controversial topics being discussed in class or during formal school activities.
- Seven in 10 (70%) of parents believe that parents should have the right to remove their child from a specific lesson regarding a controversial issue, with no consequence to their child's grade.

Introduction

There are ongoing debates across Canada impacting K-12 classrooms, school policies, and curriculum development, about how K-12 schools should tackle controversial issues with children; the importance of neutrality and facts in the classroom, and how informed and involved parents should be in these decisions. This research brief examines how parents feel about these questions, by analyzing the results of a recent survey of parents with children in K-12 classrooms (public and independent schools) across Canada, conducted by Leger.

For example, as research by Zwaagstra (2024) shows K-12 curriculum guides in Canada are becoming less fact-based and more open to teacher interpretation, should K-12 schools focus on the presentation of facts or allow a stronger influence of teachers' individual opinions and/or interpretations of facts?

As controversial issues about which there is seemingly no clear societal consensus are being tackled in Canadian classrooms, how involved should parents be in providing consent before controversial topics, like addressing climate change and sexuality/gender, are broached?

These questions impact provincial education policies and school-level policies around parental information and consent. They also have far-reaching impacts on school curricula and teacher curriculum guides: how specific should curriculum guides be in requiring the teaching of specific facts (e.g., the key players, dates, and context of specific historical events)? Or perhaps, only broad themes should be prescribed, and the specific things taught should be left to the discretion of teachers?

The Leger poll indicates there is broad consensus among K-12 parents that teachers should teach facts, not opinions, that age-appropriate conversations and material should be required, that parental consent is critical, and that balance matters greatly in Canadian classrooms. Further, most parents feel that parental information and consent is important when controversial issues are broached in schools.

Details on Polling Methodology

The Fraser Institute commissioned a poll from Leger (2024) that surveyed parents of school-aged children (ages five-18) enrolled in public and independent schools. A total of 1,202 interviews were conducted via Leger's on-line panel. One thousand interviews were conducted with a representative sampling of parents across Canada. An additional 100 interviews were conducted in Alberta and British Columbia while ensuring a representative sampling was maintained across the nation. The interviews were conducted from March 25 to April 8, 2024. As a non-probability survey (in this case, a survey drawn from a research panel), a margin of error is technically not to be reported. For comparative purposes, however, the margin of error would be $\pm 2.8\%$, 19 times out of 20. Results were weighted according to age, gender, and region to give a representative sample of the parent population in Canada. The numbers presented in this poll have been rounded to the whole number. However, raw values were used to calculate the sums presented and therefore may not correspond to the manual addition of these numbers.

Parental Support for Facts-Based Curricula

A large majority of parents across Canada believe that both teachers and curricula should focus on children learning facts, rather than the interpretation of those facts.

The Leger poll asked parents of K-12 children:

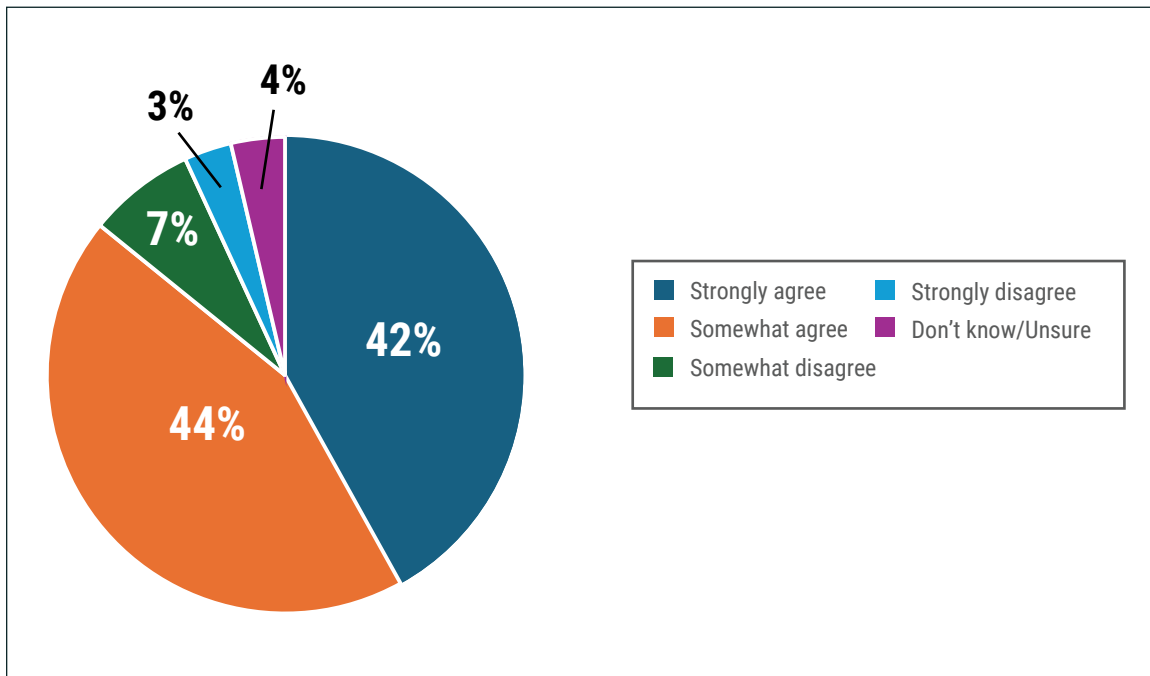
There is currently some debate about how much teachers and curriculum in K-12 schools should focus on children learning facts, versus teachers' interpretations of those facts, which can include opinions. As a parent, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

Teachers and curriculum in K-12 should focus on providing students with facts, and a learning environment within which students can openly explore facts.

Respondents could select one of the following levels of support: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, and don't know/unsure.

As shown in Figure 1 below, 86% of parents with kids in K-12 schools agree (including respondents who strongly agree or somewhat agree) that teachers and curriculum in K-12 should focus on providing students with facts, and a learning environment within which

Figure 1: Overall parental support for facts rather than opinions in Canadian classrooms



students can openly explore facts. Only 10% of parents disagree, and 4% don't know or are unsure.

Figure 2: Regional breakdown of parental support for facts rather than opinions in Canadian classrooms

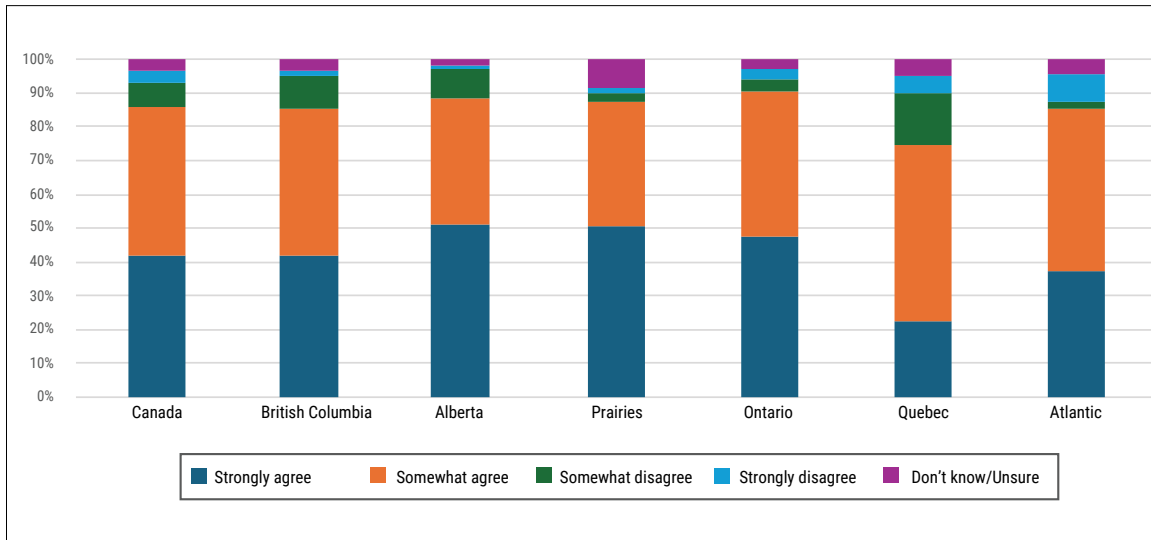


Figure 2 above, shows the regional breakdown of parental support for schools and curricula focusing on facts rather than teachers' interpretations of facts. Parental support was strongest in Ontario (net 90% support) and was 85% or higher in every province outside of Quebec, where three-quarters of parents (74%) supported this idea.

Controversial Issues in K-12 Classrooms

Three-quarters of parents with kids in K-12 schools agree that students should either be presented both sides of controversial issues while in school, or that controversial issues should be avoided entirely.

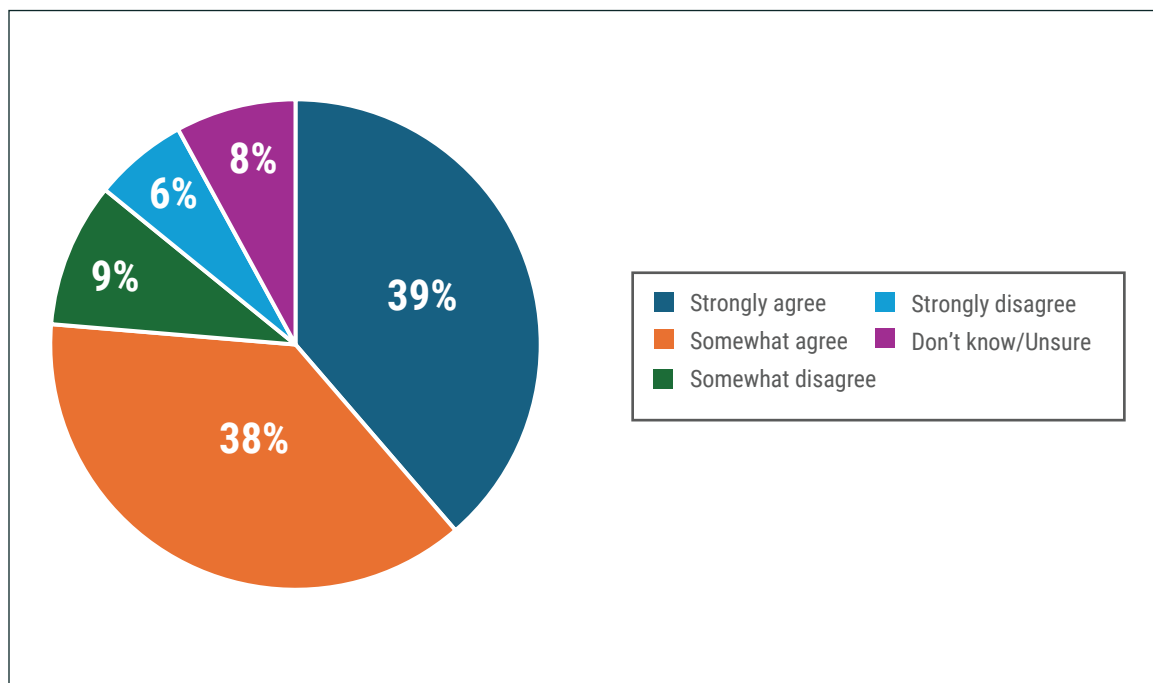
The Leger poll asked parents of K-12 children:

There are many controversial issues about which different families hold different views, and about which a general consensus has not yet been formed in society or amongst experts. Such as: how to best respond to climate change or sexuality/gender. Some of these issues are discussed or taught in K-12 schools. As a parent to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

As a general rule, students should be presented both sides of controversial issues or avoid them entirely.

Respondents could select one of the following levels of support: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, and don't know/unsure.

Figure 3: Parental support for presenting both sides of controversial issues



As shown in Figure 3, 76% of parents with kids in K-12 schools support (strongly support or somewhat support) the general rule that students should be presented both sides of controversial issues or they should be avoided entirely. By contrast, 16% of parents disagree (strongly disagree or somewhat disagree) with this statement and 8% don't know or are unsure.

Figure 4: Regional breakdown of parental support for presenting both sides of controversial issues

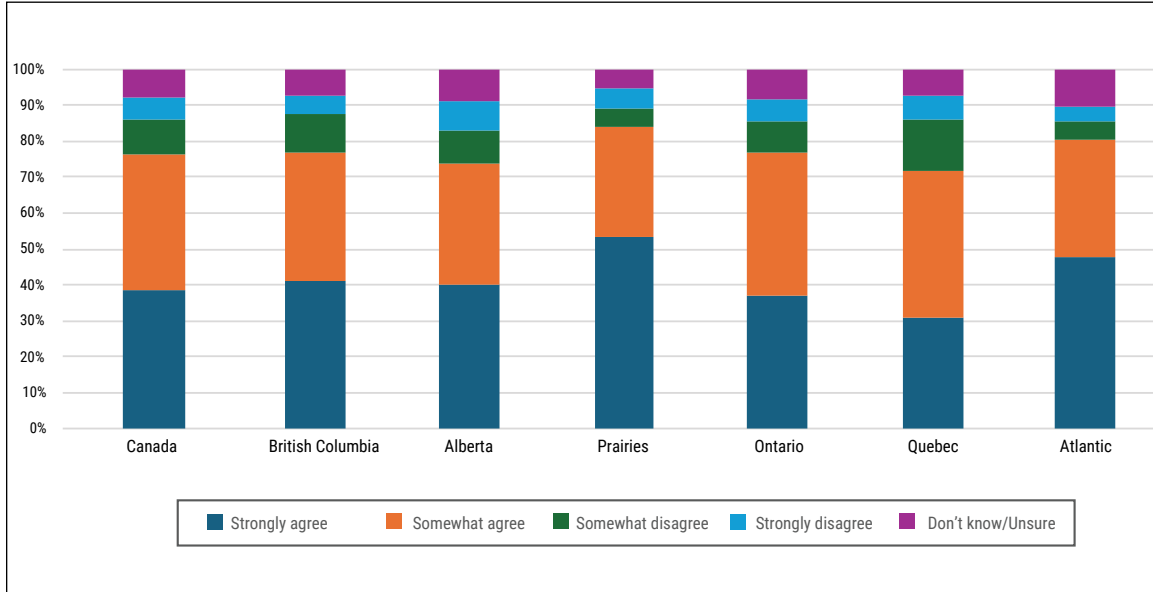


Figure 4 above shows support for children being presented both sides of controversial issues, or these issues being avoided, was strongest in Saskatchewan and Manitoba (84% net support) and Atlantic Canada (81% net support) and weakest in Quebec (72% net support).

Table 1 continued on next page

Age-Appropriate Material and Discussions in K-12 Classrooms

A strong majority of parents—nine in 10—with kids in K-12 schools believe that the material presented, and conversations had in K-12 classrooms should always be age-appropriate.

The Leger poll asked parents of K-12 children:

When it comes to providing instruction on topics that may be controversial, do you agree or disagree that the material presented and conversations in the classroom should always be age-appropriate?

Respondents could select one of the following levels of support: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, and don't know/unsure.

As shown in Figure 5 below, 91% of parents with kids in K-12 schools across Canada agree (strongly agree or somewhat agree) that classroom material and discussions should always be age-appropriate.

Figure 5: Parental support for all classroom material and discussion being age-appropriate

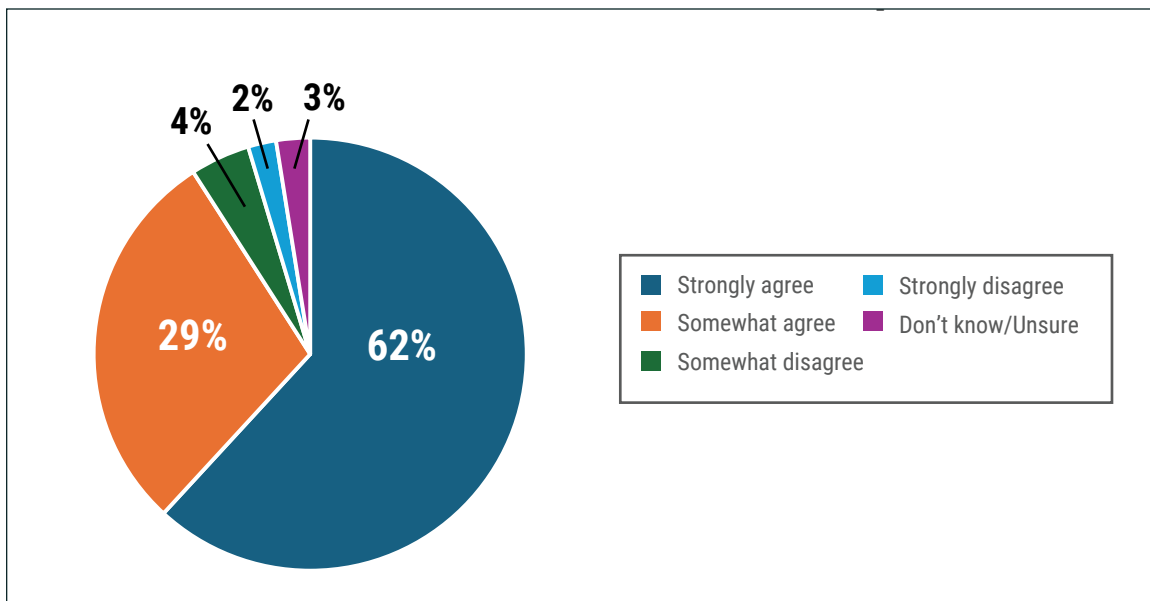
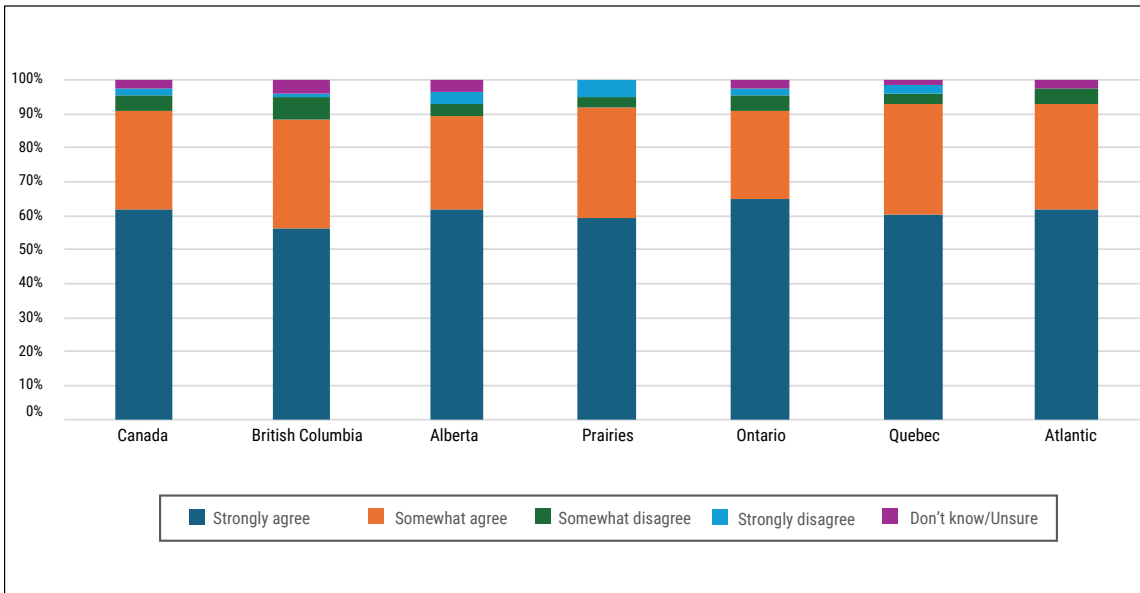


Figure 6: Regional breakdown of parental support for all classroom material and discussion being age-appropriate



As Figure 6 illustrates, this consensus is highest in Quebec and Atlantic Canada (net 93% support in both regions), but was close to 90% or higher across all provinces/regions. Nationally, only 7% of parents disagree, and 2% don't know or are unsure.

Parental Consent Regarding Controversial Classroom Topics

Over four in five parents with kids in K-12 schools believe that schools should provide parents with advance notice when a controversial topic is going to be discussed in class or during formal school activities.

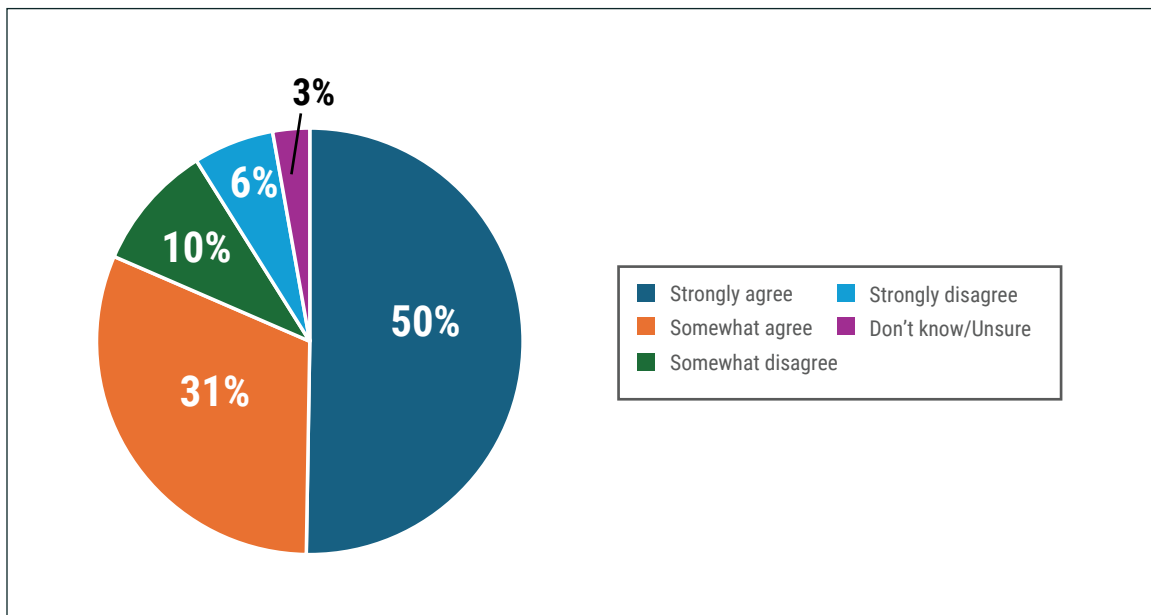
The Leger poll asked parents of K-12 children:

As controversial issues (about which there is no societal consensus) are discussed in K-12 classrooms or during clubs or extracurriculars, some parents may wish for schools to provide them with advance notice so they may discuss the issues with their child in advance or remove their child from that specific lesson. As a parent, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

Schools should provide parents with advance notice when a controversial topic is going to be discussed in class or during formal school activities.

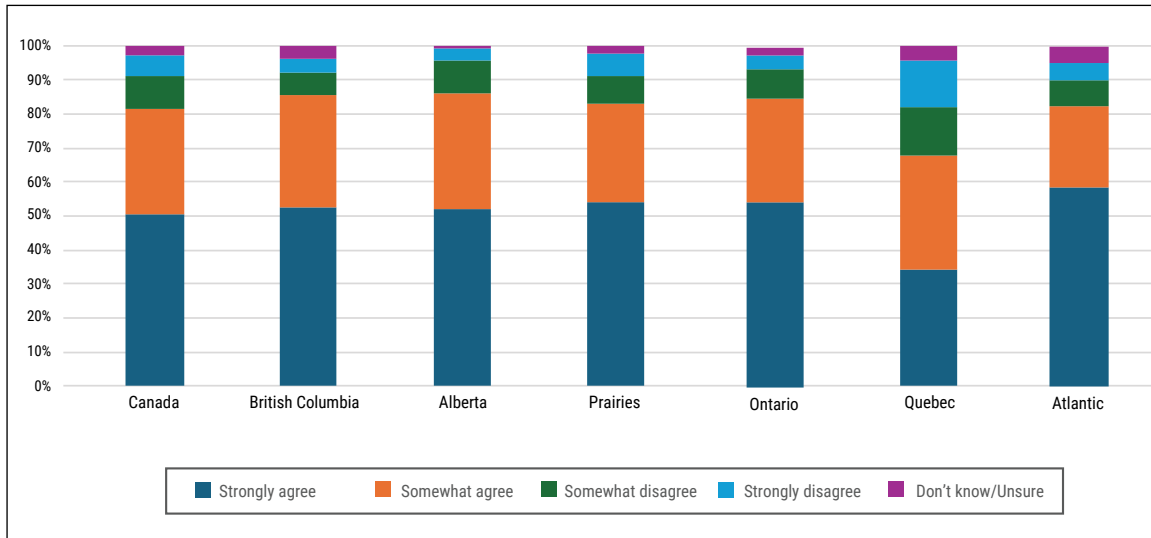
Respondents could select one of the following levels of support: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, and don't know/unsure.

Figure 7: Parental support for advance parental notice of controversial topics



As shown in figure 7, 81% of parents with kids in K-12 schools believe that schools should provide advance notice of controversial topics being discussed in class or during formal school activities. Conversely, 16% of parents disagree with this, and 3% of parents don't know or are unsure.

Figure 8: Regional breakdown of parental support for advance parental notice of controversial topics



Support for schools providing advance notice of controversial topics was 83% or higher in every province/region, as shown in figure 8 above, except Quebec where only 68% of parents agreed. Nationally, support was higher among immigrant parents (88% net support) than non-immigrant parents (79% net support).

Parental Right to Remove Children from Specific Controversial Classroom Topics

Expanding on the previous question, the Leger poll also asked parents with kids in K-12 schools whether they believe parents have the right to remove their child from a specific classroom lesson regarding a controversial issue or topic, without negatively impacting their child's grades. The majority of respondents believe parents do, or should, have the right to do so.

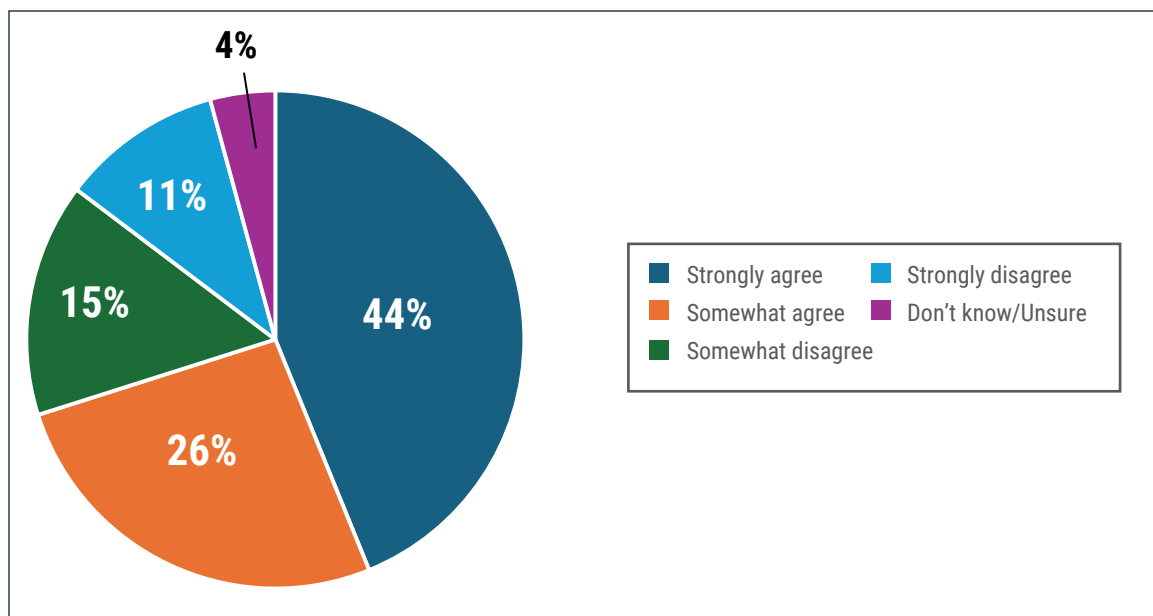
The Leger poll asked parents of K-12 children:

As controversial issues (about which there is no societal consensus) are discussed in K-12 classrooms or during clubs or extracurriculars, some parents may wish to withdraw their children from such instruction or activity. As a parent, do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

Parents should have the right to remove their child from a specific lesson regarding a controversial issue or topic with no consequence to the child(ren)'s grade.

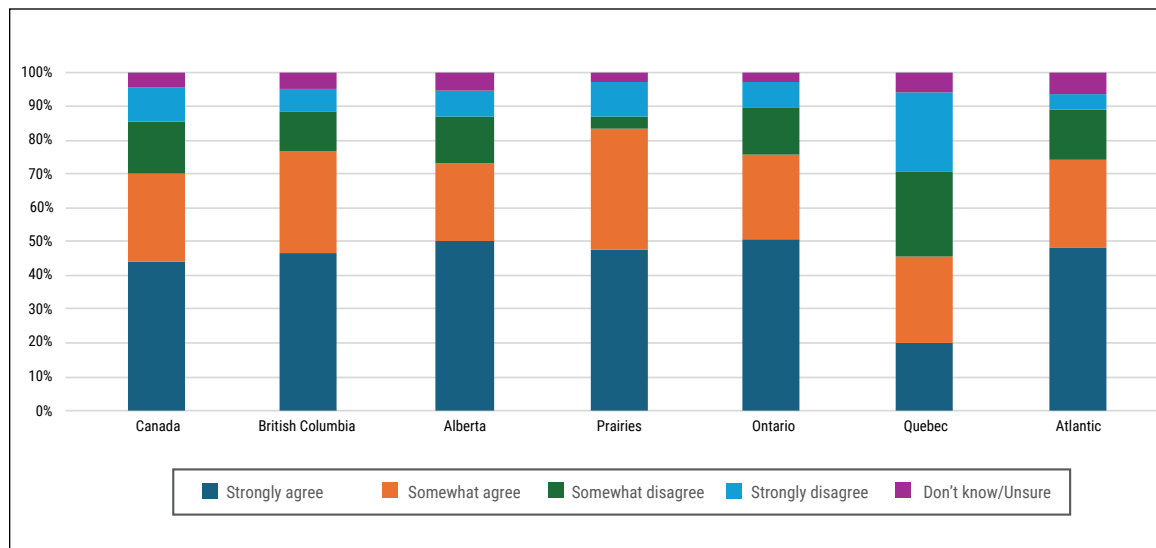
Respondents could select one of the following levels of support: strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, and don't know/unsure.

Figure 9: Parental support for right to remove children from controversial lessons without consequence to child's grade



As shown in figure 9 above, 70% of parents with kids in K-12 schools believe that parents should have the right to remove their child from a specific lesson regarding a controversial issue or topic with no consequence to their child's grade. While 44% of parents strongly agreed and 26% somewhat agreed, 26% of respondents disagreed that parents should have this right (including somewhat disagreed and strongly disagreed).

Figure 10: Regional breakdown of parental support for right to remove children from controversial lessons



As indicated in figure 10 above, support was strongest in Manitoba and Saskatchewan, where 84% of parents said parents should have the right to remove their child from specific lessons regarding controversial issues, without impacting the child's grade. In every other province/region outside of Quebec, net support of parents was 73% or higher. By contrast, only 45% of parents in Quebec agreed.

Why Do Some Parents Oppose the Idea of Other Parents Removing their Child from Specific Controversial Lessons?

The Leger poll probed deeper into understanding why those parents who do not believe that other parents should have the right to remove their child from specific controversial lessons without impacting their child's grade, feel that way. Respondents who said they disagreed that parents should have this right, were asked to explain why. Responses were then categorized. Parents' responses were sometimes categorized into multiple categories, when applicable, which explains why the percentages do not add up to 100.

Of the 26% of respondents who do not believe parents should have this right, the majority (60%) said it is because "children need to learn about all topics/viewpoints, regardless of their parents' bias." Another 20% of parents said parents should not have this right because controversial topics taught in class "prepares children/provides knowledge to form their own opinions;" 15% of respondents said [we] "need to trust the educators/curriculum;" 11% said it "helps develop critical thinking and open-mindedness;" 9% said "it's important to debate/discuss with respect;" and 1% said "parents must accept an impact on grades by withdrawing the child." An additional 5% fell into the "other" category, 9% didn't know, and 14% preferred not to say.

Conclusion

This cross-country survey of parents with children in K-12 schools shows strong consensus by parents across all regions for K-12 teachers and curricula focusing on facts rather than opinions, and for neutrality, balance, and age-appropriateness in classrooms when breaching controversial topics, like addressing climate change and sexuality/gender. Further, there is broad cross-Canada support amongst parents for parental involvement and prior consent in what children are learning in school, and for parents to remove their children from specific controversial lessons if they choose, without impacting their child's grade (except in Quebec, where only 45% of parents agree). Of those parents who do not agree that other parents should have the right to remove their child from specific lessons, the most common reason provided was that “children need to learn about all topics/viewpoints, regardless of their parents' bias.”

Ultimately, this survey shows K-12 parents in Canada value balance rather than bias in their kids' classrooms and that parental involvement and consent is important. Canadian parents are broadly aligned on the idea that schools should leave decisions regarding controversial issues up to parents.

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