UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA GRADUATE COLLEGE

HOW DO PARENTS OF DIFFERENT POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS PERCEIVE CURRENTLY DEBATED EDUCATIONAL TERMS AND ISSUES? AN IN-DEPTH QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

By

GRAYDON MORRIS
Norman, Oklahoma
2025

Downloaded from SHAREOK. Persistent Handle URL: https://hdl.handle.net/11244/341196

HOW DO PARENTS OF DIFFERENT POLITICAL ORIENTATIONS PERCEIVE CURRENTLY DEBATED EDUCATIONAL TERMS AND ISSUES? AN IN-DEPTH QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

Dr. Curt Adams, Chair

Dr. Daniel Hamlin

Dr. Elizabeth Zumpe

Dr. Wonkyung Jang

© Copyright by GRAYDON MORRIS 2025
All Rights Reserved.

Abstract

Polling data indicate that public opinion is polarized on contested educational issues. Currently debated educational terms and issues, such as Social Emotional Learning, Critical Race Theory, and prayer in schools, have caused contentious debate among parents and guardians. There is competing polling that suggests that these divisions may be fluid based on one's social identity that are not necessarily political in nature. These findings have only been narrowly researched with descriptive data and are not well understood. To address this gap, this study sought to examine parent and guardian perceptions of currently debated educational terms and issues. To understand this issue deeply, this study focused on parent perceptions of currently debated educational terms and issues and the effect of Social Identity Theory on these perceptions. Open-ended surveys (n = 15) were conducted with a sample of parents and guardians in Oklahoma to collect detailed and expansive perspectives on education as well as demographic data. These open-ended surveys contribute to better understanding of parent and guardian perceptions with varying political orientations and how those perceptions influence their support for or opposition to such currently debated educational terms and issues within Oklahoma public schools. While parents often aligned with their political in-groups on topics like Critical Race Theory, gender and sexuality, and religion in schools, findings revealed that parental identity often moderated perceptions when issues were framed through direct experiences with their children's education. The study found agreement across political lines on the importance of high-quality education, Social Emotional Learning concepts, and parental involvement in their school community. Supplemental state polling data from the Oklahoma Education Journal helped contextualize these findings with parent and non-parent comparisons

on education issues. This research revealed that framing of the issues, trusted sources of information, and personal experience significantly impact parental perceptions.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction 1

Chapter Two: Literature Review 18

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework.....34

Chapter Four: Research Methods.....41

Chapter Five: Findings.....53

Chapter Six: Discussion.....87

References.....101

Appendices.....110

Chapter One: Introduction

Recent polling shows that public education is becoming a battleground for increasingly polarized debates of political issues (Brenan, 2023; Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022; Minkin, 2024; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). Polling data on parental perspectives in education often reveal stark partisan divisions aligned to political orientations (Brenan, 2023; Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022; Minkin, 2024; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). The existing polling research demonstrates the exponential growth over the past few decades of political polarization between democrats and republicans (and those that lean toward each political pole) across a range of issues (Brenan, 2023; Brezicha et al., 2023; Cahn, 2023; Doyle, 2007; Minkin, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2017). This polarization has begun to significantly influence educational debates. Surveys conducted in 2022 and 2023 highlight the partisan divides in opinions about public schools, the Department of Education, government influence on education, parent-teacher relationships, the role of religion in schools, and the adoption of diversity and inclusion focused mission statements (Dunn & Cerda, 2022; Hatfield, 2023; Oliphant & Cerda, 2023; Greenwood, 2022). However, it is worth noting that when parents are asked about education without framing questions in the context of the national culture war, their responses often differ, indicating a higher level of satisfaction with their own children's schools (Brenan, 2023; Houston, 2021; Kamenetz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Minkin, 2024).

The current climate of political polarization has led to issues that a short while ago may have been taught in schools without controversy, such as diversity and inclusion, Social Emotional Learning, and topics such as slavery, have become targets of intense attacks or impassioned defenses based upon one’s political identity (Brenan, 2023; Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007; Hatfield, 2023, Horowitz, 2022, Levinson et al., 2021, Odabaş & Aragao, 2023;

Minkin, 2024). These partisan flashpoints extend from the classroom level to the district level. An April 2023 Pew Research analysis found significant differences in the mission and vision statements of K-12 public schools, these differences tended to align with the majority political orientation of an area (Hatfield, 2023; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). Despite many similarities existing in the goals written into mission statements across the nation, such as 80% of statements including commitments to long term student success and college and career readiness, there are still numerous partisan divides around the language included in many mission statements (Hatfield, 2023; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). The analysis found that usage of the word diversity in mission statements was two times more probable in areas that voted largely for democrats with 44% mentioning the term compared to republican leaning areas in which the term appeared in only 21% of statements (Hatfield, 2023; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). Similar trends were seen with the terms equity, social, emotional, and inclusion with each appearing more often in democratic leaning areas than in republican leaning areas (Hatfield, 2023; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). As of 2025 diversity, equity, and inclusion, also known as DEI, has quickly become a topic of division with the Trump administration threatening to withhold federal funds from K-12 public schools that support DEI initiatives (Mehta, 2025). These divisional trends tended to also reflect a school's location with suburban and urban schools more likely to include language seen in more heavily represented by democratic voters and rural areas more likely to correlate with trends seen among areas with more republican voters (Hatfield, 2023; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023).

Skepticism of Social Emotional Learning follows similar patterns beyond just mission statements with parents and guardians that identify as republican and republican leaning, these parents view Social Emotional Learning as largely negative based on the term. Democrats and those that lean democratic more widely support the use of Social Emotional Learning in schools

in polling (Horowitz, 2022; Prothero, 2021; Tyner, 2021). Notably, a large majority of parents and guardians support social emotional concepts such as self-management, resilience, emotional intelligence, and goal setting regardless of political orientation (Horowitz, 2022; Prothero, 2021; Tyner, 2021).

Lessons on race, racism, and the extent of their influence on American history has become another hotly debated educational issue that republicans and democrats disagree on along partisan political lines (Hatfield, 2023, Horowitz, 2022). While Pew polling research found no majority consensus in parental opinions about teaching lessons on slavery, a higher percentage of parents and guardians that identified as a democrat (or democratic leaning) felt slavery should be taught in schools than the percentage of parents and guardians that identify as republican (and republican leaning) (Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022). Furthermore, when asked about the idea that slavery has had a lasting impact on black people in American society, opinions continued to be divided by political orientation (Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022). 70% of respondents that identified as a democrat (or democrat leaning) agreed with content that teaches slavery still affects the position of Black Americans in society, whereas among those respondents that identified as republican (and republican leaning), 66% felt it was appropriate to teach the history of slavery, but not that it still affects Black Americans in society today (Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022).

Religion in schools is yet another controversial issue that parents and guardians are divided on in K-12 public schooling (Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022). The attempt to expand religion in public schools has led to multiple states to propose bills that would, among other things, require the posting of the Ten Commandments, replace school counselors with religious chaplains, and create dedicated spaces and times to introduce prayers and religious studies

(Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022). When asked if Christian prayer should be allowed in schools 59% of republican (and republican leaning) respondents approved, with 29% answering that this would be acceptable even if other religious denominations were excluded (Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022). 63% of democratic (or democratic leaning) parents and guardians answered that religious prayer should be forbidden in schools no matter the denomination being represented (Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022).

School board meetings have often been arenas for debates, arguments, protests, and counter-protests, this remains true as more educational terms and issues enter the political spotlight (Mervosh & Heyward, 2021; Roegman et al., 2022). As schools reopened after Covid-19 closures, districts noticed an uptick in those running for school boards motivated by many of the political divisions of recent years (Mervosh & Heyward, 2021; Roegman et al., 2022). Districts across the country saw candidates run for and against issues such as Covid-19 lockdowns, mask mandates, Black Lives Matter and protests surrounding the movement, transgender bathroom policies and more (Mervosh & Heyward, 2021; Roegman et al., 2022).

In March of 2023 House Republicans passed the "Parents Bill of Rights" which, according to one's political leanings may either allow parents more transparent access to what their children are learning or create legislation that does less to strengthen already existing parent rights and more to further an agenda that would seek to control curriculum content and how it is taught (Sprunt, 2023). Further polling has shown evidence of families deeply divided along partisan political lines around a host of education areas (Anglum et al., 2023; Levinson et al., 2021). Wide ranging topics such as what subjects and content should be focused on, principal efficacy, the influence of the federal government, school boards, teachers' unions, and whether public schools are having a generally positive effect on our society are all largely split along

party lines (Brenan, 2023; Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Minkin, 2024; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023).

At the same time polling research shows that families across the political spectrum broadly support their children's schools and teachers, approve of teaching difficult subject matter, and feel informed as to what was being taught (Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022; Kamenetz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). Some of the data gathered from parents show a disconnect between concepts they disapprove of (Social Emotional Learning, for example) while still approving of support for student mental health initiatives (Prothero, 2021; The Economist, 2022; Tyner, 2021). Similarly, families that strongly oppose the idea of Critical Race Theory being taught in pre-K-12 schools may conflate any lesson on race as doing just that (Prothero, 2021; The Economist, 2022; Tyner, 2021). The varying data collected in these polls illustrates that parent perceptions may be having an impact on their support of public schools despite the possibility that families may support the fundamental underpinnings behind the policies and terms that have become politically charged (Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). This study sought to determine how families of different political orientations perceive currently debated educational terms and issues with a particular focus on the impact of Social Identity Theory. Additionally, how those perceptions affect their support for, or opposition of, broader educational issues in public schools.

The history of education in the United States of America is one of fierce, factious debate with multiple conflicting interests pulling educational progress in many different directions over hundreds of years. The idea of equity, and who it applies to, has led to heated debates about education that have influenced, and been influenced by, various shifts in politics, economics, and

cultures over time (Rury, 2012). From early colonial life to the common school movement, to John Dewey and the Progressive movement, from the Civil War and the Reconstruction era to Brown V. Board of Education, public schools have evolved over time to what we recognize today, but this evolution has rarely been swift or without controversy. Each reform that has been attempted or implemented in the last two hundred years or so has been met with fervent debate on both sides of each issue, and in some instances throughout our history as a nation educational reform has led to violence (Rury, 2012). It is important to note that polarization in the past fueled by racist ideologies led to some of the first schools for African Americans being burned down and required federal troops to assist in desegregation efforts (Rury, 2012).

Given the history of education in the United States, is it reasonable to think that today's climate of polarization is remarkable or in any way different from the past? Examining educational policy of the past twenty years may give some insight into why the current relationships of politics, education, and families might be of interest. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, signed into law by President George W. Bush introduced standardized testing and accountability measures that were eventually bemoaned by teachers, schools, and researchers who largely disagreed with the approach to closing equity gaps (Hamlin & Peterson, 2018). The NCLB successor, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law by President Barack Obama continued the standardized testing and accountability measure approach, but instilled the states with more autonomy over the process (Hamlin & Peterson, 2018; Rury, 2012). This decision was derided or applauded along political lines with liberals fearing that more conservative states would use the broader autonomy to undermine education, specifically for minorities and low-income students and families and conservatives approving less federal mandates (Rury, 2012). While civil rights groups supported the programs continuation of

monitoring student subgroups for greater risk (Rury, 2012). Strikingly, despite concerns there was large bipartisan support that helped both programs pass into law (Houston, 2021; Rury, 2012).

Disagreements over state versus federal control would become a centerpiece of political polarization with the introduction of Common Core Standards (Rury, 2012). The Common Core curriculum, implemented in 2009, was an effort to standardize lesson plans and content standards for math and reading across the country (Rury, 2012). The uniform curriculum was met with further suspicion about overreach of the federal government and infringement on states to control education policy (Rury, 2012).

In this same regard, the school choice movement continued to challenge a perceived increase in federal control over education and saw many local governments advocating for alternatives to traditional public schools, such as charter schools and voucher programs, to close the equity gap. Critics of the movement, however, have pointed to such plans to redistribute federal education funds to schools that can then skirt oversight and accountability (Rury, 2012). These policies have sparked debates about their impact on public school funding and whether equity gaps are being closed or broadened because of them.

The Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 disrupted public education, prompting debates over remote learning, school reopening, and the digital divide (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022). Even as schools reopened and students returned, masking and vaccine requirements remained a flashpoint of polarization within communities leading to acrimonious rhetoric and in some cases physical violence at school board meetings (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022). While political divides may have existed in educational debates prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, those differences of opinion

and polarization seem to have widened and coalesced even further along partisan lines as a result (Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022).

Recent polling has shown that opinions have become increasingly partisan and polarized, with many on the political right questioning the common good and the motives of public education as an institution in general, while retaining the broad support of those that identify as politically left leaning (Brenan, 2023; Diliberti & Schwartz, 2022; Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Minkin, 2024; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). Politicians have also entered the fray with some suggesting that public schools are indoctrinating students with dangerous ideology. For instance, Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida has banned gender and sexuality studies in school curriculum, restricted content on racism and racial conflicts in U.S. history, and passed legislation restricting use of students preferred pronouns (Gecker, 2023).

A new report from education researchers at UCLA, UT Austin, UC Riverside, and American University estimates that politically motivated attacks on U.S. public schools around LGBTQ+ rights and race-related education cost schools approximately $3.2 billion during the 2023–24 school year (Beckett, 2024). These attacks, largely driven by right-wing campaigns, began with efforts to restrict teaching about racism and evolved into targeting transgender student policies and LGBTQ+ inclusion (Beckett, 2024). Hiring lawyers, security personnel, spent responding to misinformation, handling public records requests, and managing community backlash were listed as contributing to the financial cost of political attacks in education (Beckett, 2024). Many school districts experienced higher staff resignations, increased mental health needs, and a diversion of funds away from educational programs (Beckett, 2024). Superintendents across the country described feeling under siege, with many reporting harassment, threats, and deeply demoralized staff (Beckett, 2024). Some were falsely accused of

being sexual predators as part of a widespread, fear-driven disinformation campaign amplified by conservative media and national organizations (Beckett, 2024). The report emphasizes the emotional toll and the degradation of school climate, with researchers warning that these attacks are not typical civic disagreements, but part of a nationalized strategy aimed at disrupting public education for political gain (Beckett, 2024).

Most recently President Trump instructed the newly appointed education secretary to begin shutting down the Department of Education (Bender, 2025; Bender et al, 2025). Since its creation in 1979, the U.S. Department of Education has faced consistent opposition from republicans, who argue that education should be managed at the state and local levels rather than by the federal government (Bender, 2025; Bender et al, 2025). Efforts to eliminate the department began with President Ronald Reagan in the early 1980s and have resurfaced periodically with a majority of republicans voting in favor of eliminating the agency in 2023, though the proposal ultimately failed (Bender, 2025; Bender et al, 2025). These efforts are another indication of education coming to the forefront of political debate in the U.S. and opinions becoming further entrenched along partisan political lines.

Existing polling analyses highlight sharp divides on education issues and terms along partisan lines (Hatfield, 2023; Houston, 2021; Houston et al., 2022; Hurst, 2022, Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). These analyses show that positive opinions of public education in general have seen some decline in recent years (Hatfield, 2023; Houston, 2021; Houston et al., 2022; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). Within the trend of declining positive views on public schools and educational issues, research shows that opinions largely align with political identity (Hatfield, 2023; Houston, 2021; Houston et al., 2022; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). Polling research indicates that those identifying

as democrats tend to rate public schools more favorably than those identifying as republican, revealing how the role of partisan political identities has become a significant factor in how parents and guardians rate public school performance (Hatfield, 2023; Houston, 2021; Houston et al., 2022; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). As newer educational topics emerge and become entangled in partisan politics it becomes harder to discern the perceptions of parents and guardians as fewer data points exist (Houston, 2021; Houston et al., 2022). Furthermore, as these emerging topics become fodder for partisan political debates the existing research and analyses shows opinions that are starkly divided, more modestly split, and sometimes in agreement across political identities (Hatfield, 2023; Houston, 2021; Houston et al., 2022; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023).

Public opinion on these contentious educational issues has become increasingly polarized, particularly on topics such as social-emotional learning, Critical Race Theory, gender and sexuality, and religion in schools (Hatfield, 2023; Houston, 2021; Houston et al., 2022; Hurst, 2022, Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). While polling data suggest that these divisions exist, there is conflicting evidence indicating that opinions may not be strictly political but instead influenced by broader aspects of social identity (Hatfield, 2023; Houston, 2021; Houston et al., 2022; Hurst, 2022, Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). However, current research on this topic is largely descriptive and lacks deeper qualitative exploration of how parents and guardians perceive and interpret these issues within their own educational experiences.

This gap in literature limits understanding of the underlying social identity factors that help shape parental attitudes toward educational policies and terminology. Without qualitative

insights into how and why these perceptions form, discussions surrounding these issues remain overly generalized and fail to account for the nuances within different social groups.

To address this gap, this study examines parent and guardian perceptions of currently debated educational terms and issues through the lens of Social Identity Theory. By collecting open-ended survey responses from a diverse sample of parents and guardians in Oklahoma, this research seeks to examine how social identity influences parental support for or opposition to contested educational issues. The findings provide richer, more context-driven insights into the complexity of parent and guardian perceptions, moving beyond statistical trends to explore the personal experiences and influences behind these viewpoints. This study aimed to fill gaps in current research by exploring nuances within political polarization among parents and guardians through open-ended surveys to better understand opinions on educational terms and issues and how those opinions may be affected by Social Identity Theory.

Issues of consensus vary wildly in polling research and may indicate that social identity plays a large role in how parents and guardians perceive educational issues and how they respond to them when polled. (Hatfield, 2023; Houston, 2021; Houston et al., 2022; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). Some of the varying gaps in agreement and disagreement may be due to the subject matter being asked about, but other instances reveal an interesting caveat to the polarization seen in the media or from politicians attempting to score political points suggesting that how issues are framed polarization may not be as strong a factor as believed for families (Kamenetz, 2022; Prothero, 2021; Taylor, 2017). For example, when asked about programs labeled Social Emotional Learning, parents that identified as democrats reported more favorable feelings about the program than parents that identified as republican (Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007; Kamenetz, 2022; Prothero, 2021; Taylor, 2017; Tyner,

2021). Terms associated with Social Emotional Learning such as whole child development, emotional intelligence, grit, and growth mindset were likewise met with support or opposition along political party lines with democrats preferring whole child development and emotional intelligence, while republicans favored grit and growth mindset (Kamenetz, 2022; Prothero, 2021; Taylor, 2017; Tyner, 2021). However, when the terminology is removed and parents are asked about the importance of their children learning life skills and social skills, support rises across parent groups regardless of political orientation (Kamenetz, 2022; Prothero, 2021; Taylor, 2017; Tyner, 2021). So while polling may suggest that democrats support Social Emotional Learning more than republicans the divides in opinion begin to shrink when parents are asked about the importance of their children learning to understand and control their emotions, setting goals, empathizing with others, and other statements that rely less on educational jargon and more on the intended outcomes of Social Emotional Learning programs (Kamenetz, 2022; Prothero, 2021; Taylor, 2017; Tyner, 2021).

Little scholarly research exists on parent perceptions of these educational issues and terms. Despite polling research revealing steep divides between parents and guardians based on political orientations, there is another aspect to parent perceptions that suggests framing may have a lot to do with parent and guardian perceptions (Kamenetz, 2022; Prothero, 2021; Taylor, 2017). When asked to specifically reflect on their own child's school and educational performance parents and guardians were more likely to answer favorably (Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022; Kamenetz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Prothero, 2021; Tyner, 2021). A poll conducted by NPR/Ipsos found that 76% of parents and guardians surveyed felt that their child's school did a satisfactory job of informing them about the curriculums being taught, especially when topics could be perceived as controversial (Kamenetz, 2022).

While existing polling research explores parent perspectives and public opinion, there is a gap in the literature in the form of a lack of in-depth qualitative research capturing the nuanced reasons as to how and why parents and guardians form the perspectives and opinions that they do. Specifically, little is known about how different social identities can affect perspectives and opinions of parents and guardians on educational terms and issues. This study sought to address this gap in literature through qualitative insights that could add contextual considerations to existing polling data through open-ended surveys.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to perform an in-depth examination of parents' perceptions of educational issues and terms across different political orientations. Specifically, this study asked how parents and guardians perceive currently debated educational terms and issues in public schools across different political orientations and social identities.

To address parent and guardians' perceptions of currently debated educational terms and issues and how they are impacted by Social Identity Theory, the study explored the following questions:

- *Research Question 1. How do parents of different political orientations perceive currently debated educational terms and issues?*
- *Research Question 2. How do parents describe social factors influencing their views on education issues?*

This study surveyed parents and guardians of students in Oklahoma public schools. Oklahoma has consistently elected republicans to both state and national offices in recent elections with republicans having a majority in the State House and Senate and controlling the Governorship since 1992 (Party control of Oklahoma State Government, 2024). Some politicians

have embraced increasing political polarization within the state. The current State Superintendent, Ryan Walters, ran and won his election on a platform focusing on the rhetoric of banning books, Critical Race Theory, gender identity, and general opposition to what he called "woke ideology" (Murphy, 2023). Walters would go on to heighten his rhetoric against his perceived political opponents at a state budget hearing in May of 2023, referring to teachers' unions as "terrorist organizations" (Palmer, 2023). These divisions have clearly begun to go beyond debating the merits of educational policy and resemble more divisive political debates. Like many states there is still a political divide between urban and rural areas in Oklahoma with the two largest cities, Oklahoma City and Tulsa, leaning slightly more liberal with election polling data showing more competitive races between republicans and democrats in these two cities (Leip, 2020). These nuances within the state may lead to interesting insights into parent and guardian perceptions as well as other intersecting factors such as race and socio-economic status, factors that may affect perceptions based on Social Identity Theory.

This study employed qualitative research methods with the aim of conducting a comprehensive analysis of parent and guardian perceptions of currently debated educational terms and issues with a focus on the influence of political orientation and social identity. The study sought to add to the existing body of research obtained from polling, by offering a deeper understanding of how parents and guardians perceive educational terms and issues based on political orientation and social identity. The research design centered on open-ended surveys designed to better understand the nuances of parental opinions and how perceptions may shift depending on the context of the questions and social identities of the participants (Hamlin, 2020). A social identity framework was used to examine parent and guardian perceptions and how they

may change given different contexts to provide a more comprehensive understanding of views on education.

To facilitate the data collection for this study a sample of parents and guardians from Oklahoma's public schools was selected and surveyed. Surveys were administered to ascertain participants' political orientations, school types (urban, suburban, rural), and student grade level, enabling a comprehensive breakdown of data across these identified demographic categories. The study employed a combination of a priori codes derived from existing literature and emerging concepts identified through the survey process and analysis. The research methods involved collecting and coding open-ended surveys with parents and guardians of Oklahoma public school students to capture a holistic perspective on parent perceptions of debated education policies.

For the purposes of this study, it is necessary to define some of the terms that will be referenced throughout:

Republican: Supporters of the republican political party. Republicans currently support conservative ideas such as small government, free-market capitalism, and values typically described as traditional. For the purposes of this study the term republican will be interchangeable with the term conservative. (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2022).

Leaning Republican: Identifies an individual that may not agree with all republican political objectives but likely aligns with republican policies or candidates more often than democratic ones.

Democrat: Supporters of the democratic political party. Democrats currently support liberal ideas such as increasing social equality and inclusion, environmental protection, creating a social safety net, and a more active role for government in addressing societal issues. For the purposes

of this study the term democrat will be interchangeable with the term liberal. (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2022).

Leaning Democrat: Identifies an individual that may not agree with all democratic political objectives but likely aligns with democratic policies or candidates more often than republican ones.

Critical Race Theory: CRT is an academic framework that proposes that the laws and legal institutions in the U.S. are inherently racist and act in systemic ways using racism to maintain inequality and oppression of people of color (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2024).

Social Emotional Learning: SEL refers to the educational process of developing students' emotional intelligence, intrapersonal, and interpersonal skills to improve well-being and academic success (Fundamentals of sel. CASEL, 2023).

Prayer in Schools: The permissibility of organized prayer or religious activities in public educational institutions. In this case, prayer might challenge legality when considering the separation of church and state (US Department of Education, 2023).

Gender Ideology: Understanding of gender roles, identities, and expressions, often associated with discussions on gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and societal attitudes toward diverse gender identities (Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia, 2024, February 9).

Gaining a more comprehensive understanding of parent perceptions of currently debated educational terms and issues has the potential for significant contributions within the field of education. By having a more complete grasp of parental perceptions on issues creating controversy, this research may contribute to insights into how curriculum and education initiatives are communicated to parents and guardians. The results of this study may help to deepen understanding of how political polarization and partisanship impacts parent and guardian

perceptions, as well as contributing to the existing knowledge of how social identity shapes attitudes toward education. Furthermore, this study can offer contributions to education policies by identifying areas of shared priorities among parents and guardians of different political orientations and may potentially inform future education policymaking and implementation.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Polarization in the U.S. has become an inextricable part of American life, affecting aspects across political, social, and cultural spectrums (Abramowitz, 2010; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007; McCarty et al., 2006; Pew Research Center, 2017). Since the 1990s research has shown that ideological divides have steadily increased and gaps in agreement over a host of issues have widened (Abramowitz, 2010; Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007; McCarty et al., 2006; Pew Research Center, 2017). Political polarization reached new levels during Barack Obama's terms as President and the divisions and trends continued to increase during Donald Trump's first Presidency (Abramowitz, 2010, Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007; McCarty et al., 2006; Pew Research Center, 2017). Issues such as government funding, race, gender identity, religion, immigration have all seen ideological divides increase and most starkly along partisan political lines (Abramowitz, 2010, Abramowitz & Saunders, 2008; Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Brezicha et al., 2023; Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007; McCarty et al., 2006; Pew Research Center, 2017). The debate over education is no different as parents and guardians seem to be as sharply divided over many of the same issues mentioned previously, often along political party lines as well (Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007; Hatfield, 2023; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023).

As with polling, some research exists that does highlight nuances within political polarization trends, especially among parents and guardians (Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2010; Hatfield, 2023; Houston, 2021). While existing literature highlights sharp divides on educational issues and terms along partisan lines (Anglum et al.,

2023; Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007; Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023), some polling suggests that depending on how issues are framed polarization may not be as strong a factor as it may seem (Arceneaux et al., 2013; Fiorina, Abrams, & Pope, 2010; Kamenetz, 2022; Prothero, 2021). The reality remains that parents and guardians are increasingly divided along those same partisan lines when asked about educational terms and issues (Anglum et al., 2023; Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007; Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022, Houston, 2021; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023), but polling also suggests that while families may have a stance on a political topic, they are not opposed to concepts behind certain topics that have become ideologically polarizing; SEL, CRT, LGBTQ+ discussions, etc. (Brezicha et al., 2023; Horowitz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021). For instance, despite polling showing some parents resisting school initiatives such as SEL or being wary that schools are implementing race or gender related topics that may be perceived by them as inappropriate, the latest findings from a national survey of parent mindsets found that an overwhelming majority of participants want their children to attend schools that support their voices and opinions, use historically accurate curriculums materials, and offer support and services for mental and emotional well-being (Wilson, 2023, Zalaznick, 2023).

The history of public education in the U.S. illustrates how education policies and initiatives alongside shifting societal norms have each affected and influenced one another (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Rury, 2012; Zimmerman, 2022). Women's suffrage and racial desegregation created sea changes in American society that led to educational reforms expanding access to women and black students that in turn would lead to educational policies having reciprocal effects on society (Rury, 2012; Zimmerman, 2022). The historical foundations of education serve as a valuable resource for understanding the context and public policy debates

that have helped shape education in the United States. through different eras and how changes in one affect the other (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Rury, 2012; Zimmerman, 2022). This relationship between education and society demonstrates how closely intertwined the two are and offers some insight into why policy changes and societal shifts have often led to heated debates and polarized attitudes (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Rury, 2012; Zimmerman, 2022).

Debates over education curriculums and controversies, and why both sides of each feel justified in their stances, highlight the difficult challenges of finding compromise on subjects that relate to some of the most deeply held beliefs by individuals. Issues such as race and religion, among others, have figured into fierce debates about what should be taught in schools as well as the impacts that identities and polarization have had on public education cannot be understated (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990; Rury, 2012; Zimmerman, 2022).

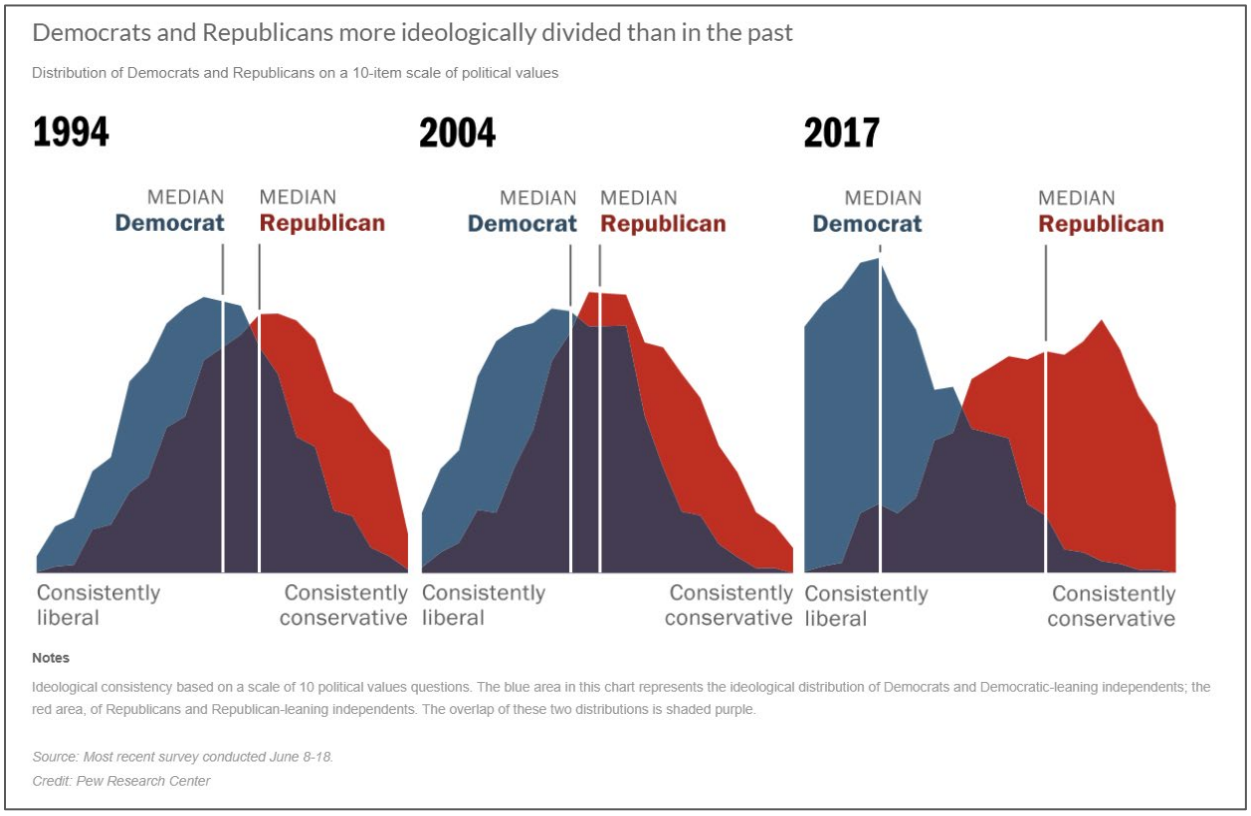
Despite the heated debates that have existed in education in America, there have been instances of bipartisanship and consensus that have led to significant educational policies that have transcended party lines (McGuinn, 2006; McGuinn, 2017). For instance, policies such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), first signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965 and reauthorized multiple times through 2015 was passed with bipartisan support, as were its later iterations No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act (Houston, 2021; McGuinn, 2006; McGuinn, 2017). These laws were meant to ensure equal access to equitable education for all (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). These laws are examples of bypassing bipartisan divides to create legislation meant to improve education and saw such disparate groups such as conservative leaning business leaders and left leaning civil rights groups come together and try to improve nationwide accountability and standards for educational excellence (Houston, 2021, McGuinn, 2006, McGuinn, 2017). Conversely, teachers'

unions and states' rights advocates aligned in opposition to these laws to minimize federal overreach in public education (Houston, 2021; McGuinn, 2006; McGuinn, 2017). These examples illustrate that despite what polarization existed in the past, there were times when consensus could be achieved; however, in recent decades, ideological divisions have continued to increase making this type of bipartisanship rare (Hatfield, 2023; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). Since the end of World War II education has become a major driver of social policy changes and in turn the role of education in politics has become more prominent and increased partisan divisions. Initiatives to address issues of equity, racial desegregation, LGBTQ inclusion, bilingual education, and special education needs have been met with vocal support and opposition making them politically contentious and increasing the rarity with which bipartisan agreement is found on educational issues (Rury, 2012).

Parental Perceptions of Education and Growing Polarization Trends in the U.S.

Much of the research on parent perceptions on educational issues has been collected through polling. Polling shows partisan divides among families aligned with political orientation. Concurrently, polling shows that when educational issues are separated from a political stance some families express less polarization around those same issues (Hatfield, 2023; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). As seen in Figure 1, a recent Pew Research Center study, which draws from surveys of over 5,000 adults conducted in 2017, showed that political polarization among democrats and republicans has continued to exponentially increase over the last three decades on numerous issues (Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007; Cahn, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2017).

Figure 1



Note: This graphic illustrates how democrats and republicans have become more ideologically divided over time, using data from surveys conducted in 1994, 2004, and 2017. It measures ideological consistency based on responses to 10 political values questions, placing responses along a spectrum from consistently liberal to consistently conservative. Pew Research Center. (2017). *The partisan divide on political values grows even wider*. Retrieved March 9, 2021, from https://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/.

These increasing ideological divisions have started to impact education and educational debates. In October 2022, a random sampling of 5,098 adults were surveyed, and the results found that 72% of democrats or democratic leaning respondents felt that public schools were having a positive effect on the country, compared to 37% of republicans as seen in Figure 2 (Dunn & Cerda, 2022; Hatfield, 2023). This breakdown of opinions along political lines is generally indicative of many of the opinions of those surveyed about currently debated educational terms and issues (Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007; Hatfield, 2023). A similar poll conducted in March 2023 found opinions once again divided along political lines when asked

about favorability towards the Department of Education (Hatfield, 2023; Oliphant & Cerda, 2023). When polled, 29% of republicans and those who lean republican reported favorable views of the government department while democrats and those leaning democrat reported that 62% see the Department of Education in a favorable light (Hatfield, 2023, Oliphant & Cerda, 2023). These partisan divides stay consistent when polling parents about all levels of government (federal, state, local) when it comes to the influence these institutions have on public education (Greenwood, 2022; Hatfield, 2023). When polled about whether parents have enough or too much influence over what is taught in public schools, 35% of republicans and 39% of democrats believe parent influence is "about right" (Greenwood, 2022; Hatfield, 2023). However, when looking at the polling for parent influence, 44% of republicans report parents do not have enough influence compared to 19% of democrats that feel parents have too much influence (Greenwood, 2022; Hatfield, 2023). Similar trends exist when looking at teacher influence with 44% of republicans and 42% of democrats believing teacher influence is "about right" while 16% of republicans feel teachers have too much influence and 35% of democrats feel teachers do not have enough influence (Greenwood, 2022; Hatfield, 2023). These trends continue along politically partisan lines when republican and democrats were asked about the place religion has in schools, with republicans favoring prayer in classrooms and the ten commandments being displayed, whereas democrats were largely opposed to such measures (Hatfield, 2023). Likewise, schools that adopted mission statements that mentioned diversity, equity, and inclusion were overwhelmingly found to be in areas that voted for democrats rather than for republicans (Hatfield, 2023).

Interestingly, there is considerable polling that brings some of these findings into question. Namely, when parents and guardians are asked about education in a way that avoids

national culture war trends, even if the underlying concepts are similar, they may answer differently or at the very least seem to be satisfied with their own student's school and related issues (Houston, 2021; Kamenetz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021).

Scholarly Research on Parental Perception, Evolution of Polarization, and the Impact of Social Identity in Shaping Education Policy Views

Houston et al. (2022) describes the findings of an Ipsos Public Affairs survey from May 2 to May 30, 2022, using the Ipsos Public Affairs' Knowledge Panel, a database of adults that are nationally representative of the U.S. Respondents were selected via this database and comprised two separate subsamples. The first was a nationally representative sample of adults in the United States (1,784 respondents), while the second focused on American parents, stepparents, or foster parents of children in grades K-12 (1,857 respondents). The parent subsample included oversamples of parents from specific groups, such as those with children in charter schools, private schools, Black parents, and Hispanic parents. This survey analysis showed that partisan polarization around educational issues (Covid 19 safety measure, teachers unions, race, and racism discussions, etc.) has become sharply polarized in recent years, but noted that polarization in education has been trending upward for decades (Houston et al., 2022). Despite politicization increasing around education the divides are somewhat smaller than in other areas of public policy in the U.S. (Houston et al., 2022).

Houston's work, "Polarization and the Politics of Education: What Moves Partisan Opinion?" explores the increasingly divided relationship between education policies and political opinions and to what extent polarization can be increased or decreased through various mechanisms (Houston, 2021). Houston's research aims to identify the mechanisms driving partisan polarization concerning education policies in the United States (Houston, 2021).

Mechanisms Houston focused on includes individuals interpreting policy information through a partisan lens, reinforcing their existing beliefs rather than adjusting their views based on new date. As well as political party messaging that can influence opinions on policy issues regardless of policy outcomes, leading individuals to adopt their party's stance on an issue rather than evaluating the policy itself. Houston's research seeks to analyze experimental and nonexperimental survey data to measure the effects of the availability of policy information on polarization, how partisan opinions are affected by exposure to moderate policy positions, and the effect of having children in the household on the level of political polarization on education issues (Houston, 2021). Houston analyzed a series of national surveys to gauge public opinion on education policy issues. These surveys employed random sampling techniques to ensure representation across demographics and political affiliations (Houston, 2021). The survey shows opinions as mostly polarized along political party lines, but there is some evidence that being the parent or guardian of students may act as a mechanism to reduce polarization (Houston, 2021). Through survey data analysis, he examines the relationship between political ideology, party affiliation, and attitudes towards education policies. The data Houston examines comes from the annual Education Next Surveys from 2008-2014 polling preferences of education policy. The survey respondents are chosen from a large database of adults that are nationally representative of the U.S. (Houston, 2021). This study highlights how political polarization may be impacted by one's social identity, specifically one's identity as a parent or guardian.

Social Identity and Parent/Guardian Perceptions

Social Identity Theory was originally developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner to better understand intergroup dynamics (Tajfel et al., 1979). Their work focused on more clearly understanding the processes through which individuals form their self-concept and how in-

groups and out-groups are formed (Tajfel et al., 1979). The theory recognizes that social identity and intergroup dynamics can be greatly influenced by the social context and membership in multiple groups in each situation (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Several studies have been conducted that reinforce the ideas behind the theory, namely that people desire to self-identify with a group, even given minimal motivations to do so, being part of the in-group is the motivation (Attwell & Smith, 2017; Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Campbell, et at., 1960; Doise et al., 1972; Houston, 2021; Lelkes, 2021; Lewis-Beck, et al., 2009; Rudolph & Hetherington, 2021; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel & Billic, 1974; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner, 1975; Turner & Oakes, 1986; West & Iyengar, 2022; Zaller, 1992). The existing studies highlight that participants found it more important to emphasize the "maximum difference" between their in-group and opposing out-group than to maximize any profits that would benefit their in-group alone (Attwell & Smith, 2017; Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Campbell, et at., 1960; Doise et al., 1972; Houston, 2021; Lelkes, 2021; Lewis-Beck, et al., 2009; Rudolph & Hetherington, 2021; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel & Billic, 1974; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner, 1975; Turner & Oakes, 1986; West & Iyengar, 2022; Zaller, 1992). These studies also find that individuals can identify with multiple in-groups and in doing so hold differing opinions depending on the context of a situation and which in-group they may be identifying with in the moment (Attwell & Smith, 2017; Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Campbell, et at., 1960; Doise et al., 1972; Houston, 2021; Lelkes, 2021; Lewis-Beck, et al., 2009; Rudolph & Hetherington, 2021; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel & Billic, 1974; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner, 1975; Turner & Oakes, 1986; West & Iyengar, 2022; Zaller, 1992). Polling of polarization in the U.S. shows political polarization has widened further than any other

category, demonstrating how intensely individuals identify with their political party as an in-group (Pew Research Center, 2017).

Research has shown that new policy information is usually processed by voters through a political lens often conditioned by the Social Identity of their chosen political affiliation (Attwell & Smith, 2017; Brezicha et al., 2023; Campbell, et at., 1960; Doyle, 2007; Houston, 2021; Lewis-Beck, et al., 2009; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Often an individual's political identity begins forming through socialization at home and influence from parents and guardians (Attwell & Smith, 2017; Brezicha et al., 2023; Campbell, et at., 1960; Doyle, 2007; Houston, 2021; Lewis-Beck, et al., 2009; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). As individuals grow older their choices and beliefs can be reinforced by their political identity as they desire to more closely align with their chosen in-group of democratic or republican or other political identity (Attwell & Smith, 2017; Brezicha et al., 2023; Campbell, et at., 1960; Doyle, 2007; Houston, 2021; Lewis-Beck, et al., 2009; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986; Zaller, 1992). The more often a person aligns with the views of their political party, the more likely they are to process any new information to uphold their in-group as positive and show the corresponding out-group as negative (Attwell & Smith, 2017; Brezicha et al., 2023; Campbell, et at., 1960; Doyle, 2007; Houston, 2021; Lewis-Beck, et al., 2009; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986; Zaller, 1992). This process can lead to a distorted or selective view of political or educational policies as individuals that feel supported in some aspects of their social identity by a political party will tend to support all policy positions of that party (Attwell & Smith, 2017; Brezicha et al., 2023; Campbell, et at., 1960; Doyle, 2007; Houston, 2021; Lewis-Beck, et al., 2009; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986; Zaller, 1992). Social Identity Theory has been useful as a framework for understanding

educational experiences, but the existing research has mostly focused on student engagement and interaction with teachers and curriculums (Bartlett, 2022; Haslam, 2017; Kelly, 2009). This prior research has highlighted how student identities and group associations can influence relationships, engagement, and academic achievement (Bartlett, 2022; Haslam, 2017; Kelly, 2009). These studies emphasize the importance of acknowledging social identities in the classroom to foster inclusive environments that may benefit all students and explore how students' social identities, such as race, socio-economic status, and others can affect engagement and disengagement in school (Bartlett, 2022; Haslam, 2017; Kelly, 2009). These studies demonstrate that educational outcomes can be impacted by social identity factors and how in-group and out-group dynamics exist within learning environments.

Thus far, much of the existing literature examining parent and guardian perceptions of educational terms and issues and the influence of political parties has been done through polling (Anglum et al., 2023; Hatfield, 2023; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Newall & Diamond, 2022; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). The Pew Research Center, the Brookings Institution, and Ipsos group have done a significant amount of parent and guardian polling with regards to educational issues and political party membership how they align with an individual's political beliefs (Anglum et al., 2023; Hatfield, 2023; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Newall & Diamond, 2022; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). For each of these polls an appropriately large pool of respondents were interviewed through survey questions about educational terms and issues, political orientation, as well as other relevant demographic data (Anglum et al., 2023; Hatfield, 2023; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Newall & Diamond, 2022; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). For a majority of these polls, researchers determined that respondents had at least one child in

the home attending school (Anglum et al., 2023; Hatfield, 2023; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Newall & Diamond, 2022; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023).

Houston (2021) analyzed data from the 2008-2014 editions of the Education Next Survey. Respondents for the survey are chosen through the Knowledge Network group, and the participant pool is designed to represent 99% of the U.S. population (Houston, 2021). Houston's (2021) research focused on providing participants with information on the effects of providing education spending data on polarization, providing ideologically moderate policy endorsements on polarization, and a nonexperimental analysis utilizing the same data to measure if there was a connection between having children in the household and polarization. This analysis concludes that there are methods through which depolarization can occur (Houston, 2021). When given more information about education spending before polling, respondents answered in ways that indicated less polarization in opinions (Houston, 2021). The data shows that with more information about education spending, respondents' answers were more likely to be untethered from what their political party beliefs may be (Houston, 2021). Exposing respondents to moderate policy positions of politicians tended to close the partisan polling gaps, however, this movement in opinions seems to happen only on the democratic side with republican opinions remaining unmoved (Houston, 2021). Houston (2021) found that in a 2010 experiment republicans were given moderate positions of President Obama leading to a more extreme polarization (Houston, 2021). In other words, when presented with moderate positions of politicians that an in-group normally opposed, members of that in-group would hold negative views of the policies regardless of the content (Campbell, et at., 1960; Houston, 2021; Lewis-Beck, et al., 2009; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986; Zaller, 1992).

In the third aspect analyzed, Houston (2021) found that having children at home seemed to minimize the differences between people from different political parties. It was found that respondents tended to agree more on educational issues in these cases (Houston, 2021). However, it was inconclusive if having children in the home is the direct cause of the depolarization seen in the findings (Houston, 2021). These findings suggest that people can set aside their political beliefs on education, especially with certain information or subjective experiences, but political leaders can bring back the divide (Houston, 2021; Kamenetz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021). As a result, both democrats and republicans that are also parents and guardians tend to support increased education spending, be more supportive of schools and education in general than those without children in the home, and they tend to be especially supportive of their child's own school and teachers (Houston, 2021; Kamenetz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021).

Some existing research examining the intersection of political affiliation and education policy have demonstrated that partisan identification can shape public attitudes toward higher education and schooling (Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007). One study found that individuals identifying as democrats were generally more supportive of expanding access to higher education, viewing it as a public good that benefits society at large (Doyle, 2007). In contrast, individuals identifying as republicans were more likely to prioritize issues of efficiency, funding, and expressed skepticism regarding governmental involvement in higher education (Doyle, 2007). This research pointed to the implications of ideological divisions on policy making, funding, and accessibility as well as the role of higher education institutions in American society. These findings illustrate the importance political identities may play when considering parent perceptions of policy decisions related to education (Doyle, 2007). Additional research on

political polarization around education has identified increasing divisions impacting debates of educational terms and issues in K–12 and higher education (Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007). Specifically, heightened partisanship has turned discussions around curriculum content, educational equity, and school governance into ideological conflicts, with contested topics such as CRT and gender and sexuality serving as flashpoints (Brezicha et al., 2023). This research posits that polarization is creating significant challenges to the foundational purposes of public education by seeking to increase censorship through the narrowing curricular inclusivity, and creating environments of hostility toward both educators and students (Brezicha et al., 2023). Researchers emphasized that findings pointed to erosion of inclusive spaces within education, potentially threatening open dialogue, critical thinking, and civic engagement (Brezicha et al., 2023). These studies demonstrate the growing entanglement between political identity and education and highlight the need for understanding parent perceptions in a diverse and polarized society (Brezicha et al., 2023; Doyle, 2007).

Outside of this recent research into the impact of political polarization on parent perceptions of educational terms and issues in the United States, much of the existing knowledge relies heavily on polling. Largely, the polling data demonstrates that throughout the past few decades, political polarization has consistently increased (Cahn, 2023; Hatfield, 2023; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2017). When polling focuses on education, data tends to show parents and guardians are sharply divided along political lines (Cahn, 2023; Hatfield, 2023; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2017). While there is some existing literature that suggests that the framing of educational terms and issues may influence the extremity of the polarization and other factors may act as depolarizing mechanisms (Houston, 2021; Kamenetz, 2022;

Levinson et al., 2021). Social identity acts as a powerful factor in creating polarization among people through the alignment of individuals with ideas favored by their in-group (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Campbell, et at., 1960; Doise et al., 1972; Houston, 2021; Lelkes, 2021; Lewis-Beck, et al., 2009; Rudolph & Hetherington, 2021; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel & Billic, 1974; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner, 1975; Turner & Oakes, 1986; West & Iyengar, 2022; Zaller, 1992). This alignment can be so rewarding to members of the in-group that they may eschew facts of a policy or position in order to remain on positive terms with their in-group (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Campbell, et at., 1960; Doise et al., 1972; Houston, 2021; Lelkes, 2021; Lewis-Beck, et al., 2009; Rudolph & Hetherington, 2021; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel & Billic, 1974; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner, 1975; Turner & Oakes, 1986; West & Iyengar, 2022; Zaller, 1992). Members of an in-group may also ignore the benefits for themselves of a particular position or policy put forth by an opposing out-group if it will reinforce the negative perceptions of that out-group (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Campbell, et at., 1960; Doise et al., 1972; Houston, 2021; Lelkes, 2021; Lewis-Beck, et al., 2009; Rudolph & Hetherington, 2021; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel & Billic, 1974; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner, 1975; Turner & Oakes, 1986; West & Iyengar, 2022; Zaller, 1992). In other words, democrats and republicans are more likely to support ideas from their own political party and be wary of ideas from the opposite party despite any benefits a proposed policy or position may hold for either group (Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Campbell, et at., 1960; Doise et al., 1972; Houston, 2021; Lelkes, 2021; Lewis-Beck, et al., 2009; Rudolph & Hetherington, 2021; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel & Billic, 1974; Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner, 1975; Turner & Oakes, 1986; West & Iyengar, 2022; Zaller, 1992). These attitudes may change when households include children (Houston, 2021; Kamenetz, 2022; Levinson et al.,

2021). In these instances, parents and guardians may adopt the social identity of parent and that identity shift may be why some research indicates parents and guardians are more supportive of education in general and view their children's teachers and schools in a more positive light (Houston, 2021; Kamenetz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021).

The existing literature illustrates how increased polarization in the U.S., particularly in relation to education and parental perceptions, has been driven by partisan politics. While some research has explored how shifting identities, and framing effects influence public opinion on education-related issues. Education has become a focal point of political debates, with parents and guardians increasingly divided along party lines on educational topics (Hatfield, 2023; Hurst, 2022). While many parents express concerns over these topics, research suggests that they still value historically accurate curricula, student mental health support, and teacher quality (Wilson, 2023; Zalaznick, 2023). This helps explain why political identities, often deeply ingrained, can shape how individuals process new information, favoring their chosen in-group, while at times shifting their primary identity from political affiliation to their role as parent or guardian, making them more open to education-related policies that benefit their children, even if they oppose them politically (Houston, 2021; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019).

Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework

To examine family and parent perceptions of educational issues and terms based on political orientation, this study drew on Social Identity Theory as formulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. Social Identity Theory is a framework that seeks to understand how individuals perceive and define themselves in relation to the social groups to belong to and interact with (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Social Identity Theory was originally formulated by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). The theory developed by the two social psychologists seeks to comprehend group membership dynamics, intergroup relationships, and how individuals form their social identity. (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Social Identity Theory posits that the emotional investments people make into different groups they identify with helps construct individual ideas of self and being (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). In doing so, this creates a division between the group or groups an individual identifies with and those groups that an individual is not a part of. This can create an "us versus them" dynamic of in-groups and outgroups (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986).

Thus, this theoretical framework, Social Identity Theory, can give insight into some of the nuances observed in parent and guardian perceptions. The theory attempts to better understand how individuals create their self-concept through identification with different groups they interact with (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Groups that an individual has a positive association with (in-groups) and those that an individual has negative association with (outgroups) can deeply influence their behavior, attitudes, and perceptions (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). In-groups and

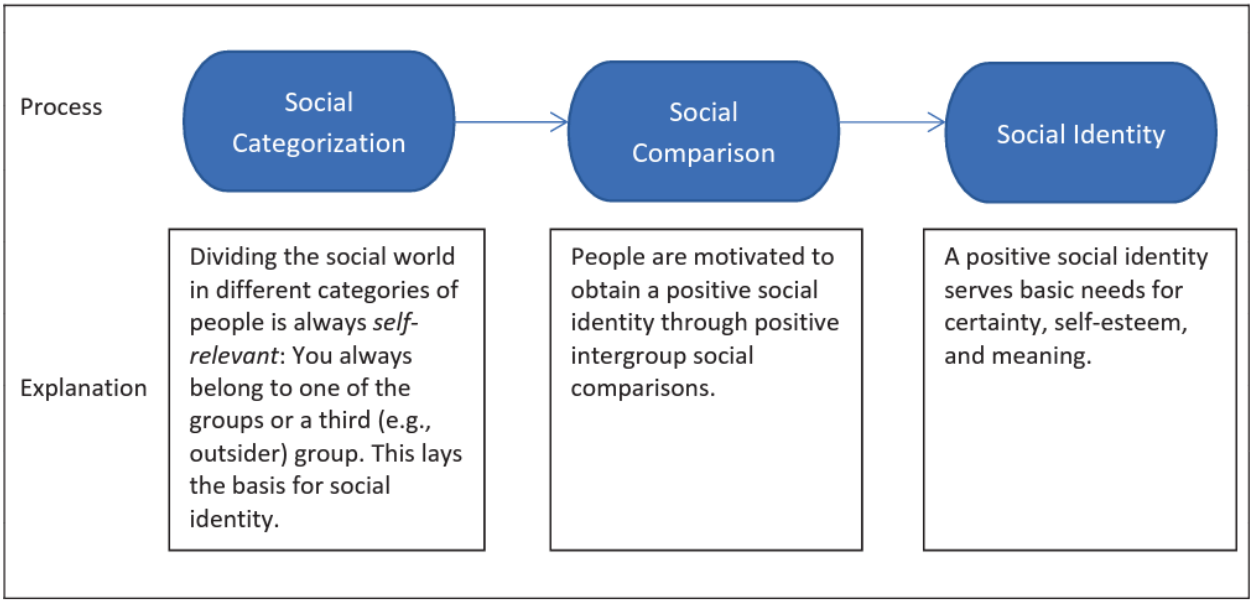
outgroups can be formed along many lines including race, religion, gender identity, political affiliation, socioeconomic status, geographic location or even sports teams (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). The theory further posits that to ensure acceptance in the chosen in-group, individuals will support the positions that support and align with said group, while at the same time denigrating the opposing group (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). The theory suggests that the recent political divide in education may be exacerbated by parents and guardians standing for or against current terms and issues that align with the values and beliefs of their identified social group (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Social Identity Theory also considers the reality that individuals can exist within multiple in-groups that can overlap or even conflict given the different contexts within which they exist (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Regarding education, individuals may identify as a member of a political party that supports or opposes particular aspects of public education, and, at the same time, an individual may identify as a parent or guardian and hold an opposing view from their political in-group (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986).

Examples of these types of in-groups and outgroups can be seen in all aspects of life such as loyalty to a local sports team, socioeconomic class, gender identity, nationalities, and political parties (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Social Identity Theory advances the idea that to align with an in-group more closely, individuals will seek out positive aspects and shared principles within the group. To further identify with a group an individual may hunt for or focus on negative aspects of its outgroup, widening the ideological divide and often creating exaggerated stereotypes (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019;

Turner & Oakes, 1986). The group categorizations of social identities can be innocuous, such as sports fandoms, or more serious, such as a clash of religious or political ideologies that can lead to conflict or warfare (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986).

Social Identity Theory works through a process involving three components: categorization, comparison, and identification (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Figure 2 (Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019) lays out the process by which an individual goes through the three components to create a self-identity based on group association. The process through these components leads to the formation of distinct social identities and the creation of self-concept that derives from the membership in different in-groups and opposition to outgroups. These group identities become a central aspect of an individual's self-concept and can significantly influence their attitudes, behaviors, and interactions with others.

Figure 2



Note: The process of social identity formation based on Social Identity Theory. This model illustrates the three stages: social categorization, where individuals classify themselves and others into social groups; social comparison, where individuals seek positive distinctiveness through intergroup comparisons; and social identity, which fulfills psychological needs for certainty, self-esteem, and meaning. From Scheepers, D., Ellemers, N., & Vliek, M. L. W., & Sassenberg, K. (2019). Social Identity Theory. In Social psychology in action: Evidence-based interventions from theory to practice (pp. 129–143). Springer.

Social Categorization

Individuals naturally categorize themselves and others into social groups based on shared characteristics. This categorization process helps simplify and structure the complex social world. The categorization process is fundamental to Social Identity Theory. It is the way in which individuals seek to derive self-concept from social groups, these shared characteristics can be race based, gender based, based on jobs or hobbies, anything group members can identify as having in common with each other (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986). This simplification of the social world helps individuals navigate group complexities and reinforce complex inter- and intrapersonal relations (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Categorization is the first step in the Social Identity Theory process of attempting to define the world more clearly and how individuals explain to themselves how they fit into the world (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986).

Political parties in the U.S. have become heavily polarized, with individuals able to categorize themselves and others along the lines of ideological beliefs, party affiliations, and policy preferences (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Political party identification can be extremely divisive with those identifying strongly with a party often aligning with that party's viewpoints. While categorization of this sort can simplify daily life for an individual, it can also lead to a mentality in which an individual adopts views in order to more closely align with one's own political party (in-group) and rejects those that belong to an opposing group (out-groups) regardless of the issue (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986).

Social Comparison

Social comparison is when one individual compares their own group to other groups. They often favor their in-group that they belong to more strongly than out-groups with which they do not belong. This intergroup comparison can lead to feelings of superiority or inferiority (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Social Identity Theory places an emphasis on the importance of comparison between groups, noting that once individuals categorize themselves into specific social groups, comparing themselves to other groups is natural and assists in sensemaking in complex social environments. (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986). Comparisons often favor an individual's in-group and reflect negatively on any opposing outgroups, these simplifications of groups and their aspects which lead to feelings of superiority or inferiority and can possibly lead to fomenting prejudice and discrimination (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986). These feelings of superiority within in-groups can be seen in today's polarized politics and how different groups can use political rhetoric, media bias, and social media echo chambers to further exacerbate divisions among groups (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986).

Social Identity

Once individuals categorize themselves into a particular group, they tend to identify with that group. This identification involves adopting the group's values, norms, and behaviors, which, in turn, influence their self-esteem and self-concept. The process of identifying with a group and its members is useful for individuals to increase their sense of belonging within that group (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986). The identification process leads to an individual aligning with the group's values, norms, and

behaviors and can significantly influence an individual's self-concept (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986).

Identification plays an important part in raising one's self esteem through group affiliation. When individuals strongly identify with a political party, it becomes part of their self-concept. The incorporation of political party as part of one's self-concept can lead to a significant connection to the group, and as individuals begin to adopt the values and positions of their political party it can result in that individual increasing their own self esteem by reinforcing negative stereotypes about any opposing groups (Mcleod, 2023; Scheepers & Ellemers, 2019; Tajfel et al., 1979; Turner & Oakes, 1986).

Social Identity Theory provides valuable insights into the dynamics of political polarization in the United States and its effect on educational debates. Categorization, comparison, and identification are all at play in the formation and perpetuation of political divisions. Understanding these components helps to shed light on the psychological processes that contribute to the growing ideological divide in American politics and offers potential avenues for addressing and mitigating polarization.

This study used Social Identity Theory to examine the recent political divide in education and how parents align with or against certain terms and issues based on their political orientation. Extant research indicates that Social Identity Theory can play a role in how people respond to political affiliations, highlighting the mechanisms of partisan polarization in the U.S. political landscape (Lelkes, 2021; Rudolph & Hetherington, 2021; West & Iyengar, 2022). The research highlights identification with a political group as a powerful driver of in-group satisfaction and out-group hostility, and that other identities may reduce political polarization in non-political contexts; however, this depolarization may not be enough to supplant the political identification

with a particular political group (Lelkes, 2021; Rudolph & Hetherington, 2021; West & Iyengar, 2022).

When Social Identity Theory is applied to parents and guardians it can be used to better understand how their self-concept is formed through group identification and if membership in multiple groups can facilitate depolarization on educational topics. Social Identity Theory suggests that this may be the case as parents and guardians align themselves with in-groups, such as being a parent or guardian of a student, this may influence their attitudes and behaviors more positively towards educational topics. Utilizing Social Identity Theory for this study to better understand parent perceptions, may assist in more deeply interrogating reasons as to why polarization or depolarization may occur. This theoretical framework will also assist in better understanding studies indicating that when issues are framed differently, polarization may decrease. For instance, parents may express less polarization around certain issues when separated from their political stance.

Chapter Four: Research Methods

The Current Study

The purpose of this study was to deeply examine parent and guardian perceptions of currently debated educational terms and issues based on political orientation and the impact of social identity. Through qualitative research methods, this study attempted to expand knowledge in polling research around parent perceptions of currently debated educational terms and issues in relation to different political orientations. This study relied on open-ended surveys to better understand the nuanced opinions of parents and guardians and how those opinions may shift depending on the context and substance of questions asked. The survey questions were designed to more fully understand how parents and guardians feel about particular terms and issues in an era of heightened political polarization and diverse parental opinions on education. This study's open-ended surveys also sought to better understand the impact of varied social identities of parents and guardians and how those Social Identity Theory can explain the changing perspectives of parents and guardians. Survey questions were designed to better understand parents and guardian understanding about currently debated terms and issues by examining participant knowledge of educational jargon and underlying concepts for these initiatives and policies.

Data collection was somewhat limited as many potential participants expressed hesitation in engaging with the study due to its subject matter. Originally, an interview protocol was designed to conduct semi-structured interviews. Some participants asked not to be included after completion of the original interview, while some other participants ended the interview before completion. All of these participants expressed discomfort with one or more subjects being asked about in the interview. These participants were averse to suggesting other potential participants,

leading to a smaller pool of interview subjects. In an attempt to continue collecting parent and guardian perception data an open-ended survey was developed in the hopes of reaching a larger audience. The survey was distributed to numerous parent and school groups via social media, emails were sent to Parent Teacher Association (PTA) groups, education advocacy groups, state and local Oklahoma political organizations, as well as various other education and parent organizations that would potentially have an interest in sharing parent and guardian perspectives. Unfortunately, many of the organizations contacted also expressed discomfort with sharing a survey with parents and guardians that could be perceived as politically charged or divisive. The reluctance among participants led to a limited pool of respondents and a potential narrowing of the range of perspectives gathered. Despite these challenges, efforts were made to ensure that the sample remained as diverse and representative as possible, even with the constraints posed by participant concerns.

As a result of the limited participant pool, supplemental polling data about education in Oklahoma was used to compare to trends found within interview answers (Hamlin, 2024). The Oklahoma Education Journal poll was administered during the spring of 2024 (Hamlin, 2024). The poll consisted of a random sample of 601 Oklahomans, including responses from parents and non-parents (Hamlin, 2024). The non-parent data included in the study was useful in comparing the impact of Social Identity Theory on perspectives regarding educational issues between parents and non-parents in the sample. The Oklahoma Education Journal results had a margin of error of +/-4 percentage points and a 95% confidence level (Hamlin, 2024).

Study Setting

This study surveyed parents and guardians of students within the Oklahoma public school system. During the 2022-2023 school year, the state of Oklahoma welcomed a total of 701,258

students into its public education system, spanning from Pre-K to 12th grade (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2021). This marks a continuing upward trend from the preceding year, with 698,696 students enrolled in 2021-2022 and 694,113 in the 2020-2021 academic year (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2021). Moreover, the enrollment figures are inching closer to the pre-pandemic 2019-2020 count of 703,650, reflecting a remarkable recovery in the state's education landscape since Covid-19 (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2021). The two largest districts in the state are Tulsa Public Schools, with a substantial enrollment of 33,871 students in the 2022-2023 academic year, followed closely by Oklahoma City Public Schools with 33,245 students (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2021). Other school districts across the state include Epic Charter School with 28,478 students, while Edmond, Moore, Broken Arrow, Putnam City, Norman, Union, and Lawton all make vital contributions to public schooling in Oklahoma with enrollments ranging from 26,190 to 13,979. Enrollment across these districts underscores the diverse and extensive nature of the state's public school system. Demographic information shows a degree of consistency in the racial and ethnic composition of Oklahoma's public-school students with Hispanic, American Indian, Black, Asian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and multi-racial students collectively constituting 55% of the statewide enrollment, while 45% of the student body identifies as white (Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2021). Further demographic breakdown reveals that Hispanic/Latino students account for 20% of the enrollment, Native American or Alaska Native students comprise 11%, Black students make up 8%, and 2% are of Asian descent. A smaller, but nonetheless noteworthy, 1% is attributed to Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students, and 13% of the student population reports being of two or more races (Oklahoma State Department of

Education, 2021). These enrollment numbers and demographics illustrate the important role public education plays for a multitude of families in Oklahoma.

Data Sources

To create a descriptive study exploring parent perceptions around educational terms and issues, parents/guardians from a subset of Oklahoma public urban, suburban, and rural schools were asked to complete an open-ended survey through a combination of random and snowball sampling via phone calls, emails, and social media outreach. Table 1 lists the total number of participants whose children attended school districts categorized as rural, suburban, and urban. Stratification of participants across multiple locale designations was intended to gather a representative sample of parent perceptions across the state of Oklahoma. Table 2 lists the total number of respondents by locale in the Oklahoma education polling data. Classifications of locale are defined as follows for the purposes of this study and as the designations in the 2024 Oklahoma Education Poll (Hamlin, 2024):

Rural: 25,000 or less

Suburban: 100,000 or less and contiguous to city above 100,000

Urban

- **Small: 100,000 or less**
- **Mid-Size: 100,000-250,000**
- **Large: 250,000+**

Table 1

Breakdown of Urban, Suburban, and Rural Locales by Number of Surveys

Locale	Number of Surveys
Rural	6
Suburban	3
Urban	6
Total	15

Table 2

Breakdown of Locales by Number of Respondents in Oklahoma Education Polling Data

Locale	Number of Parents	Number of non-parents
Rural	84	139
Suburban	48	79
Urban - Small City	14	28
Urban - Midsize City	18	18
Urban - Large City	54	111
Total	218	375

(Hamlin, 2024)

Participants

To identify a representative sample across various locales, participants surveyed were identified using random and snowball sampling with the primary criteria of having at least one student enrolled in a public school in Oklahoma. While polling research has shown that there are divides among parents and guardians about different topics being taught in schools, the divides tend to be greater in elementary school (Levinson et al., 2021). Even when considering subjects that respondents agreed should not be a part of the elementary curriculum there were still large gaps in support along political orientations (Levinson et al., 2021). As a result, parents of elementary aged students were the primary focus of recruitment efforts, however any Oklahoma parent or guardian of a current public-school student was accepted as a participant.

Parents/guardians were asked for demographic data as part of the survey. This information allowed for data breakdowns among the different demographic categories identified in Tables 3 and 4 which detail the survey participant demographic information which includes the following: gender, number of children in school and their grade-bands, school locale, age, race/ethnicity, education level, political orientation they most closely identify with, and household income. Grade band categories were sorted by Elementary, Middle and High School. These grade band categories will help determine if the divide in parental opinions about subject

matter changes as students age. These grade band divisions may also help determine if one group more strongly associates an identity with that grade band.

Table 3

Survey Participant Demographic Information

Participant	Gender	Age	Race	Education	Political Orientation	Household Income
Parent 1	Female	32	White	Technical Training	Conservative	50,000 -100,000
Parent 2	Female	34	White	Bachelors	Conservative	50,000 -100,000
Parent 3	Female	38	White	Bachelors	Conservative	>100,000
Parent 4	Female	44	White	Bachelors	Conservative	>100,000
Parent 5	Female	33	White	Bachelors	Conservative	50,000 -100,000
Parent 6	Female	35	White	Some College	Moderate, Conservative	50,000 -100,000
Parent 7	Male	34	Asian	Masters	Moderate, Conservative	>100,000
Parent 8	Female	32	Native American	Masters	Liberal	>100,000
Parent 9	Female	36	White	Bachelors	Liberal	>100,000
Parent 10	Female	37	White	Bachelors	Liberal	50,000 -100,000
Parent 11	Female	39	White	Doctorate	Liberal	>100,000
Parent 12	Female	42	Middle Eastern	Masters	Liberal	>100,000
Parent 13	Female	36	White/ Native American	Some College	Moderate Liberal	50,000 -100,000

Parent 14	Female	35	White	High School/GED	Moderate Liberal	
Parent 15	Female	38	Multicultural	Bachelors	Other	>100,000

Table 4

Survey Participant Number of Children, Grade-Level, School Locale and Political Orientation

Participant	# of Children	Grade-Levels	School Locale	Political Orientation
Parent 1	3	Elementary, Middle	Rural	Conservative
Parent 2	3	Elementary, Middle	Rural	Conservative
Parent 3	2	Elementary, Middle	Suburban	Conservative
Parent 4	1	Middle	Suburban	Conservative
Parent 5	3	Elementary, High	Rural	Conservative
Parent 6	1	Elementary	Urban	Moderate, Conservative
Parent 7	1	High	Urban	Moderate, Conservative
Parent 8	3	Elementary	Urban	Liberal
Parent 9	2	Elementary	Suburban	Liberal
Parent 10	1	Elementary	Rural	Liberal
Parent 11	2	Elementary	Urban	Liberal
Parent 12	3	*Unknown*	Urban	Liberal
Parent 13	2	Elementary	Urban	Moderate, Liberal
Parent 14	5	*Unknown*	Rural	Moderate, Liberal
Parent 15	2	Elementary, High	Rural	Other

The tables below reflect respondent demographic information from the Oklahoma education polling data (Hamlin, 2024).

Table 5

Table 5 details the political orientation of respondents and their parental status. Political affiliation options included democrat, republican, independent, and no preference.

Parental Status and Political Orientation

Parental Status	Democrat	Republican	Independent	No Preference
Yes	37	76	64	41
No	89	144	64	78
Total	126	220	142	105

(Hamlin, 2024)

Table 6

Table 6 details the gender identity and parental status of respondents. Options for gender identity included Female, Male, and a preference to not identify.

Parental Status and Gender Identity

Parental Status	Female	Male	Prefer not to say
Yes	127	83	8
No	199	165	11
Total	326	248	19

(Hamlin, 2024)

Table 7

Table 7 details the age and parental status of respondents. Age ranges included 18-29, 30-44, 45-59, 60 and older.

Parental Status and Age

Parental Status	18-29	30-44	45-59	60+
Yes	23	88	91	16
No	97	44	69	165
Total	120	132	160	181

(Hamlin, 2024)

Table 8

Table 8 details the parental status and education level of respondents. Education level options included high school degree or below, some college experience, completion of a four-year degree, or a graduate degree.

Parental Status and Highest Level of Education Attained

Parental Status	HS or less	Some college	4-year degree	Graduate degree
Yes	74	42	37	65
No	102	87	57	129
Total	176	129	94	194

(Hamlin, 2024)

Table 9

Table 9 details the political affiliations and education levels of respondents. This table displays which respondents identified as democrat, republican, independent, or chose not to disclose and identifies the education level of each respondent in the given political affiliation category. The

education level options again included high school or below, some college experience, completion of a four-year degree, or a graduate degree.

Political Affiliation and Highest Level of Education Attained

Political Affiliation	HS or less	Some college	4-year degree	Graduate degree
Democrat	38	40	10	38
Republican	45	31	23	43
Independent	30	12	25	38
No Preference	63	46	36	75
Total	176	129	94	194

(Hamlin, 2024)

Survey Protocols

Participants were able to complete an open-ended survey that asked them to answer the questions based on personal experiences as a parent or guardian of a student in Oklahoma public schools. Surveys were intended to solicit parent and guardian perceptions of currently debated educational terms and issues to better understand how Social Identity Theory may impact those perceptions. The open-ended survey format strengthened the data collection because participants could share their perceptions about educational terms and issues with more detail than polling allows, and those in-depth answers could be examined for nuances in what roles different social identities may play. The study's qualitative research method of open-ended survey responses was compared to larger sets of polling data and leveraged to better understand nuanced perceptions of parents and guardians and how those perceptions are influenced by different social groups. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing parent and guardian participants and all identifiable information was removed during the transcription process. The open-ended survey

was created and disseminated using the Qualtrics software. Survey questions, as well as recruitment materials used during this study will be included in the appendix section.

Data Analysis

A detailed list of a priori and emergent codes, drawn from extant research and survey responses, is included in Appendix D: A Priori and Emergent Codes and Categories. The appendix includes approximately 40 a priori and emergent codes organized under four overarching themes: Social Identity Theory & Social Categorization, Parent/Guardian Perceptions, Political and Policy Issues in Education, and Social-Emotional Learning and Identity Development. These a priori codes were developed through a comprehensive review of research literature related to Social Identity Theory, parent and guardian perceptions of education, and the increasing role of political polarization in public education discourse. A priori codes were applied during the initial round of analysis to identify where parent and guardian responses aligned with concepts found in the extant literature. Emergent codes were developed through analysis of parent and guardian survey transcripts. These codes reflect patterns and themes that arose during multiple rounds of qualitative data review. The use of a priori and emergent codes aided in organization of responses and development of trends within the study.

The survey questions were based on question content used in various national education perception polls and were designed to better understand how social identity can influence parent and guardian perceptions of currently debated educational terms and issues. The survey questions attempted to better understand how parents and guardians may or may not be self-categorizing into social identities, what in-groups or out-groups may have been created based upon political orientation, status as parent/guardian, or other unknown criteria. How strong are parent and guardian attachments to particular social identities and the degree to which one social

identity may outweigh another. Finally, the survey questions sought to more fully understand what influence does a social identity have on parent and guardian perceptions of currently debated educational terms and issues.

Chapter Five: Findings

In this study, participants were asked to share their perspectives about the quality of education and satisfaction with parental influence based on their experiences as a parent of a child enrolled in a public-school and their current level of awareness about educational terms and issues and media influences. The open-ended survey then asked participants to share their level of understanding and opinions about relevance and appropriateness in the school curriculum regarding four currently debated terms and issues: Social Emotional Learning (SEL), gender and sexuality, religion, and Critical Race Theory (CRT).

Due to the limited number of participant responses, this study leveraged the Oklahoma education polling data to cross reference the in-depth survey responses with the data captured for both parents and non-parents in the following aligned topic areas: support for the increase of public school funding and teacher salary, the creation of religious charter schools, and adherence to student restroom use based on assigned sex at birth. Overall, the polling data indicates that in most topics, identifying as a parent or guardian slightly shifts opinions from the non-parent responses within the same political party (Hamlin, 2024).

Findings were organized by survey categories beginning with understanding how parents perceive education quality and their level of influence and moving onto knowledge and perceptions about current education terms and issues. The findings below are structured by each topic area outlined in the open-ended survey and include the relevant Oklahoma education polling data for each topic. These terms are often discussed as distinct topics, and the structure of the findings section reflects this through the following topics:

1. Education Quality and Parental Influence
2. Informed about Terms and Issues and Media Influence

3. Gender and Sexuality
4. Religion in Schools
5. Critical Race Theory
6. Social Emotional Learning

Education Quality and Parental Influence

This section of the open-ended survey included the following questions:

- When you think about the term "high quality education," what specific aspects come to mind, and how do you believe it is reflected in your child's school?
    - How satisfied are you with the overall quality of the education your child is receiving at school?
- In your opinion, what role should parents play in their child's education, and how do you personally contribute to your child's education?
    - How satisfied are you with the amount of input that you have in what your child learns at their school?

High-Quality Education

While each participant's answers to the open-ended survey were nuanced based on their personal experiences, all parents held strong, individualized views of high-quality education, with shared themes like independent problem solving, personalized support, and effective teachers regardless of political party. When asked what the term high quality education means Parent 3, a parent of two children in elementary and middle school who identifies as conservative, shared that a high-quality education includes hands-on opportunities for her children and their school community provides this experience saying, "Organized, structure, hands-on experiences. I believe our school administration and teachers hold themselves to a high

standard and the students which results in quality education." When asked this same question Parent 8, a parent of three children in elementary school who identifies as liberal, shared that a high-quality education focuses on strong relationships between teachers and students and Social Emotional Learning and believes that she sees this illustrated through dedicated teachers in her children's school community. She says:

> "High-quality education encompasses a rigorous and engaging curriculum, strong teacher-student relationships, and a focus on social-emotional learning. It prioritizes inclusive and differentiated instruction, ensuring all students receive the support they need to succeed. Additionally, effective school leadership and strong family engagement play a crucial role in fostering a positive learning environment. In my children's school, I see this reflected through dedicated teachers who tailor instruction to meet diverse needs, a commitment to social-emotional development, and open communication that keeps families involved in the learning process."

Emergent themes from these responses include:

- Individualized and Hands-On Learning
- Critical Thinking and Problem Solving
- Student Well-Being and Holistic Development
- Data-Driven and Targeted Support
- High-Quality and Caring Teachers

Analysis from this section indicates that regardless of political party, all participants held specific beliefs about what high-quality education looks like for their child and the emergent themes illustrate various points of consensus.

The next question in this section focused on the level of satisfaction participants felt with the quality of education their child was receiving. Of the 15 responses, 73% of parents indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of education their child is receiving. While there is not a stark difference between survey results based on political parties, there is evidence that parents identifying as conservative and/or other are less satisfied with the quality of education that their child is receiving than parents that identify as liberal. Of the seven parents identifying as conservative/moderate conservative, 71% felt satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of education their child is receiving. Of the seven parents identifying as liberal/moderate liberal, 86% felt satisfied or very satisfied. Parent 4, a parent of one middle school student who identifies as conservative and is located in a suburban area shared that while they are overall satisfied with their child's education, they believe there is additional room for improvement sharing that they are, "Satisfied however I feel like there is room for improvement but [t]he lack [of] qualified teachers and staff prevent it from improving in my overall opinion". Similarly, Parent 11, a parent of two elementary aged students who identifies as liberal and is in an urban area, shared that they are mostly satisfied but that their satisfaction was primarily based on the temperament of their children, sharing that they are "Mostly satisfied. Our kids being resilient matters in my satisfaction. I'm not sure I would feel the same if they were different types of learners".

These survey findings illustrate a pattern that is mirrored in national survey data. In a national poll conducted by Gallup since 1999, Americans weigh in on their current level of satisfaction with K-12 education (Brenan, 2024). In the poll conducted in August 2024, 43% of Americans surveyed were completely or somewhat satisfied with the quality of education students received in K-12, which is up seven percentage points from the 2023 data (Brenan,

2024). However, when looking specifically at parent satisfaction, 70% are completely or somewhat satisfied with the quality of education their oldest child is receiving (Brenan, 2024). While overall parent satisfaction has decreased over the last two years, parents are much more satisfied with the quality of education their child is receiving than the general American populace's perception of education quality in the United States (Brenan, 2024). Breaking satisfaction rates down further by political party, the Gallup poll indicates that 53% of respondents identifying as democratic/democratic-leaning and 33% of respondents identifying as republican/republican-leaning are satisfied with the quality of K-12 education (Brenan, 2024). While these survey results are not disaggregated by parents and political party identification, Americans are generally dissatisfied with the quality of education and that republicans are 20 percentage points less satisfied than their democratic counterparts. (Brenan, 2024; Brenan, 2023; Minkin, 2024). These findings are indicative of the idea that even while having varying degrees of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the educational system opinions trend more positively for those that are parents or guardians. These trends would seem to reinforce the suggestion that Social Identity Theory can play a role in shifting perspectives as the personal experiences of parents and guardians have positive impacts on their educational opinions. When respondents answered questions that were centered on their social identity as parents or guardians, they typically answered in a more positive fashion than those answering questions that were more concerned with a political social identity.

Level of Parental Influence

The next questions in this section focused on the role a parent should play in their child's education and participants overall satisfaction with the amount of input they feel they have at their child's school. Similar to parent perception about what it means for their child to receive a

high-quality education, parents, regardless of political orientation, were overwhelmingly aligned that parents should play an important and supportive role in their child's education. Parent 5, a parent with three children in elementary and high school from a rural community who identifies as conservative shared that they believe parents should be as involved as possible and take responsibility for continuing education in the home saying:

> "Parents need to be as involved as they can be. I understand having to work, however if there are things that did not get finished at school then it needs to be completed at home. Parents should spend at least 10-15 min each night talking with their student about their day and asking if there is anything they need."

Parent 10, a parent of one elementary student from a rural community who identifies as liberal shares similar opinions about the role of a parent as Parent 5 saying:

> "Parents should be a huge part of students education. I make sure my daughter's skills are sharp, I [encourage] good behaviors that I expect her to show in the classroom. I make sure she does any homework that is given to her by her teacher. I listen to read and make sure to correct mistakes in her reading."

One participant, Parent 15 who has two elementary and high school aged students chose to identify their political orientation as "Other" and believes that parents should take on a leading role in their child's education, proactively discussing what topics are being covered in school and establishing a relationship with their child's teacher. They share that they believe a parent's role should be:

> "Leadership role, actively involved and able to access lessons and results. If I didn't have to work full time to provide, I would home school. I ask to see what they are working on or generally have open ended discussions on what they did in school. I will probe further if

there are specific areas of concern and check in with the teachers when I see/hear discrepancies. A lot of good grades and lack of understanding is concerning."

Regardless of political party, all 15 parents are consistent in their belief about the role parents should play in their child's education and emergent themes from all responses include:

- Assisting with homework/accountability for completion
- Advocating for their child
- Active involvement in education experience
- Supporting/communicating with teachers and the school
- Encouraging good behaviors/social skills

While all parents surveyed shared similar views about their role in their child's education, differences emerged when responding to the question "How satisfied are you with the amount of input that you have in what your child learns at their school?". Of the seven parents identifying as conservative/conservative leaning, 29%, or two parents, shared that they were satisfied with the amount of input they have. Conversely, of the seven parents identifying as liberal/liberal leaning, 86% of parents indicated they were very satisfied with the amount of input they have. Parent 1, a conservative parent of three elementary and middle school aged students from a rural community, is not satisfied because they believe their children's education should include more hands-on, practical information in the curriculum. Parent 5, a conservative parent of three children in elementary and high school, shared that their satisfaction with the level of input they have is based on the importance of their children's teachers not 'pushing' their opinions into their children and the classroom. They say:

> "50% [satisfaction level]- I teach my kids what I want them to learn at home. As long as teachers do not push their viewpoints on children I think that it is fine. Planned

parenthood should stay out of schools and it should be offered to the parents through their program if they want their child to know those things then planned parenthood can equip the parents with the information."

One moderate, liberal leaning parent, Parent 14, of five children shared that they are satisfied with the level of input they have and believe that their teachers and school community take parent suggestions into consideration sharing:

> "…they ask questions, and they involve the parents and everything so I pretty much know everything that's going on to suggest something. They don't undermine me, I guess, and take everything into consideration."

According to a Pew Research Poll from 2022 about education and parent perceptions, 44% of republican/republican leaning parents believe that parents do not have enough influence on what students are learning in school, compared to 23% of democrat/democrat leaning parents. The poll also surveyed parents about their levels of satisfaction with how much say they have in what their children learn in the classroom, with 36% of republican/republican leaning parents citing extremely high levels of satisfaction compared to 44% of democrat/democrat leaning parents (Horowitz, 2022). While the national polling data indicates that parents of both political parties are satisfied at lower rates than respondents in the open-ended survey, the differences between conservative and liberal satisfaction rates follows a clear pattern in both sets of data indicating that political social identities do play a large part in parent and guardian perspectives of educational terms and issues.

Support for Increases in Public Education Funding and Teacher Salary

Through the analysis of the open-ended survey results, it is evident that parents regardless of political party believe their child should receive a high-quality education, and the role parents

play in their child's education is important. Looking at satisfaction rates with perceived quality of education and level of input parents have in the classroom, differences emerged along political lines with republican/conservative parents indicating lower levels of satisfaction overall in both this study and national polling data. These findings may support increased understanding of the results from the Oklahoma education poll about support for increasing funding for public schools and increasing teacher salaries.

According to the 2024 Oklahoma education poll, 73% of all respondents indicate support for increasing public school funding and 76% for increasing teachers' salaries and parents supported increases in both measures at a slightly higher rate than non-parents (Hamlin, 2024). Partisan divides emerged with 90% and 91% of democrats support increasing teacher salary and school funding respectively, while 72% and 64% of republicans indicated support for the same increases (Hamlin, 2024). Notably, when analyzing this data set by parental status and political orientation, parenthood increases support for school funding across republican (+5.92%), Independent (+5.33), and No Preference (+22.37%) respondents, while democrats stayed relatively consistent regardless of their status as a parent hovering between 89% parent and 92% non-parent support (Hamlin, 2024). Similarly, parenthood increases support for increasing teacher salaries across both republicans and democrats (Hamlin, 2024).

Despite the overall trend of parenthood increasing support for increases in both school funding and teacher salary, gaps in support between republicans and democrats remain. According to poll results, 94% of parents who identify as a democratic support increasing teacher salary compared to 75% of parents who identify as republican supporting the same measure, which is a notable difference of 19 percentage points. and 89% of democratic parents compared to 68% of republican parents support an increase in public school funding, a difference

of 21 percentage points (Hamlin, 2024). These differences among parents based on political party may be explained by overall satisfaction with the quality of education and level of input parents have in their child's education, as republican/conservative parents are overall less satisfied as evidenced in both this study and the national polling data. Overall, it is evident that while parenthood and guardianship can narrow the partisan divide between republicans and democrats on educational satisfaction and parental influence there remains a gap based on political orientation. Social identities as parents or guardians produce more positive perspectives, these perspectives still seem influenced and informed by a parent or guardians' political identity.

Informed about Terms & Issues and Media Influence

This section of the open-ended survey included the following questions:

- How informed do you feel about educational terms and issues, and where do you primarily get your information?
- Are there specific national leaders or media outlets that influence your perspective as a parent/guardian on education, and if so, how have they shaped your views?

Informed about Terms & Issues

The responses to this question again highlighted how the social identities of parenthood/guardianship and political orientation can influence perceptions of how informed individuals feel about educational terms and issues. 80% of respondents indicated that they feel informed/very informed about current educational terms and issues. A key similarity across both conservative- and liberal-leaning respondents was that the direct involvement in their child's education and school communities generated a greater sense of feeling well-informed. Many respondents, regardless of political orientation, commented that they rely on direct sources such as school emails, principals, and PTA meetings to stay updated. This further suggests that being

a parent with direct access to school communication fosters a sense of informed engagement and can lead to more satisfied opinions of experience. Parent 3 and Parent 4, both conservative parents, expressed that they felt very informed. Parent three clarified that their feelings are in part because they, “make a point to be involved [in] the teachers know me and my husband.” Parent 4 commented that they receive school information through, “PTA meetings and school produced emails.” All liberal respondents also expressed feeling very informed because of concerted efforts at direct engagement with their children’s schools’ communications and parent organizations.

Political social identities still account for notable differences in the degree of confidence respondents express in their level of knowledge when divided by political orientation. All liberal-leaning respondents report feeling well-informed, while conservative-leaning respondents show more variation, with some feeling out of the loop or only somewhat informed. This could reflect differing levels of trust in institutional education sources as illustrated in national polling that shows republicans holding more negative views of public schools in general, but also the Department of Education, K-12 principals, and teachers’ unions (Hatfield, 2023).

Additionally, a few conservative-leaning respondents expressed frustration with the education system, viewing it as “chaotic” or “failing”, a sentiment that does not appear among the liberal-leaning participants. These findings suggest that while parenthood provides a shared lens for gathering school-related information, political identity may shape perceptions of how trustworthy or comprehensive that information is.

Emergent themes included:

- Feeling informed due to professional involvement
- Getting information from school emails

- Getting information from school leadership (principals, PTA)
- Feeling out of the loop or uninformed
- Using the internet or news sources

Media Influence

A near majority of respondents answered the question, “Are there specific national leaders or media outlets that influence your perspective as a parent/guardian on education, and if so, how have they shaped your views?” with skepticism toward politicians and media outlets, citing that they feel many are untrustworthy or agenda driven. Of the 15 responses 11, or 73%, of parents indicated that they did not rely on specific media outlets or national leaders to inform their views about education. Some respondents said that they engaged with some form of local or national news or social media platforms, but that they rarely formed opinions based on these outlets and relied more heavily on peer discussions and personal experiences in their own school communities. Interestingly, three respondents that identified as liberal specifically singled out state education leaders as detrimental to public education leaning into their social identity as democrats.

Currently Debated Education Terms and Issues

The next sections focus on four key terms and issues currently being debated in the national education discussion.

Social Emotional Learning

This section of the open-ended survey included the following questions:

- What does the term "Social Emotional Learning (SEL)" mean to you?

- How important do you feel it is for your child's school to teach social and emotional skills, and are there specific aspects of SEL that you find particularly important or concerning? Please explain.

Defining Social Emotional Learning

When asked to share what the term Social Emotional Learning meant, 73% of respondents were able to provide a definition based on their current level of understanding. From these responses, the following emergent themes and subthemes:

- Developing social skills and peer interactions
    - Learning how to play with others and be a good friend
    - Understanding social cues among peers
    - Communicating effectively with peers of diverse backgrounds
- Understanding and managing emotions
    - Learning how to manage and understand feelings
    - Learning how to regulate emotions
    - Building self-awareness and emotional intelligence

Of those respondents who were unfamiliar with the term, two identified politically as Moderate, Liberal, one as Conservative, and one as Other.

This wide-ranging support from parents echoes some of the national polling around SEL that found that even when parents were skeptical of the name, Social Emotional Learning, they still supported the underlying concepts and supported their children learning social emotional skills in the classroom (Committee for Children, 2022; Prothero, 2021; Tyner, 2021). Parents that were polled that were unsure if SEL skills were being taught at the child's school or who had never heard the phrase were also overwhelmingly supportive of teaching the concepts that make

up SEL (Committee for Children, 2022; Prothero, 2021; Tyner, 2021). In polling done on behalf of Committee for Children (2022) when parents were asked to define SEL answers were mostly positive, and parents understood the term Social Emotional Learning at "face value." In this poll, 43% of parents defined SEL as "social skills (interacting with and understanding others)" (Committee for Children, 2022). Among this 43% respondents were spread across the political spectrum with parents identifying as democratic (45%), independent (49%), and republican (38%) (Committee for Children, 2022). Other definitions of SEL included: "students understanding their own emotions/control," "coping/mental wellness," "liberal brain washing/woke/teacher overstepping," and "don't know/nothing" (Committee for Children, 2022). The most politically charged definition, "liberal brain washing/woke/teacher overstepping," was also the least attributed to parents with only 3% of independents, 9% of republicans, and no democrats using this definition (Committee for Children, 2022). Moms for Liberty, a conservative parent group that operates nationally and locally across Oklahoma, defines the goal of SEL in schools as psychological manipulation of students "to accept the progressive ideology that supports gender fluidity, sexual preference exploration, and systemic oppression" (Moms for Liberty, n.d.). This type of politically charged rhetoric has clearly reached some parents and given them pause about their support for SEL initiatives, but parents and guardians seem to have largely ignored these talking points in favor of supporting the interpersonal skills they believe their children should be developing as part of their school experience.

Importance of Social Emotional Learning in School Curriculum

When asked directly about the importance of teaching "social and emotional skills" in the classroom, nearly all, 86%, of respondents felt that teaching these skills was important for their

child's development. Notably, over half of the responses indicated that they believed teaching these skills was "very important", "extremely important" or "critical" to their child's education experience.

Of those who were unfamiliar with the term in the first question of this section, when asked specifically about teaching "social and emotional skills" in this question, three of the four respondents shared they believe it is important for their child. Only Parent 15, the respondent with identifies politically as "Other", shared that they believe SEL should not be included in the school curriculum indicating that they believe SEL is "opinion based learning" saying:

> "It should not be a direct objective of curriculum. These skills are naturally developed within society as life lessons and not something to be standardized within an education system. Opinion based learning is too subjective and counterproductive to independent critical thinking and is frustrating to be graded on a scale for which rules are interpreted by feelings affected by so many variables outside of one's control and varying experience levels."

From the analysis of the responses of this study, there is not a partisan divide on this issue. Interestingly, when specific language was used such as "social and emotional skills" instead of the term "SEL", the three respondents who were unfamiliar with the term shared their support for the teaching of these skills in the classroom. This may reflect a gap in knowledge around educational verbiage, however this follows a similar pattern of some national polling that suggests parents are less receptive to the term Social Emotional Learning in general and much prefer terms such as soft skills or life skills (Prothero, 2021; Tyner, 2021). This polling found that perceptions of SEL differed across several demographic data points, with political affiliation being one the largest differences of opinion and with republicans being particularly dissatisfied

with the term Social Emotional Learning (Prothero, 2021; Tyner, 2021). This illustrates how both parental and political identities can shape perspectives on educational priorities based on terminology like social-emotional learning or SEL. The overwhelming support for teaching these skills suggests that most parents and guardians, regardless of political identity, see value in their child's social and emotional development. This aligns with broader national trends where a majority supports the practice, but terminology and political identity can impact perceptions of SEL, with some groups maintaining a strict partisan divide based on the way SEL is framed and understood. This dynamic underscores how parental and political identities still play a role in educational terms and issues that may be widely accepted.

Gender and Sexuality

This section of the open-ended survey included the following questions:

- What do you believe your child should learn about gender and sexuality in school?
- How do you feel about including topics of gender and sexuality in the school curriculum?
- What age do you think is most appropriate to begin discussing topics of gender and sexuality in schools? Why?

Gender and Sexuality in the School Curriculum

Discussion about gender and sexuality in the public-school classroom is a topic that has quickly become increasingly debated with national polling showing 54% of Americans believe parents should be able to opt their children out of any lessons on LGBTQ+ issues, 58% believe a person's gender is determined by their sex at birth, 46% support policies banning transgender athletes from competing on teams that match their gender identity and 51% of Americans supporting similar policies for bathroom usage (Lin et al., 2024; Lipka, 2016; Parker, Horowitz, & Brown, 2022). These differences in opinion have thrust gender and LGBTQ+ issues in the

United States in the mainstream political and educational discourse, but respondents to this study seem somewhat less divided on the issues. Responses to the first two questions shared many similarities with respondents' beliefs about what their child should learn impacting their feelings about what topics, and to what extent, should be included in the school curriculum. There is not as clear of a partisan divide in the responses to this section as there is with other terms and issues in this study. While there are some differences between those identifying politically as conservative or liberal about the age appropriateness and depth of these topics, analysis of responses illustrates that most parents, regardless of political orientation, believe that topics of gender and sexuality should also be discussed by parents in the child's home.

In response to the first question about what their child should learn about gender and sexuality and school, three of the seven conservative/moderate conservative respondents shared that what is taught should stay focused on "science" and "puberty", two shared that topics should be taught from the "bible" or a "biblical stance", and two believed that these topics should not be discussed at all. Of the liberal/moderate liberal responses, four respondents believed that topics should be focused on "basics" and "scientific reasoning". The remaining three liberal/moderate liberal responses were more varied from one parent open to a more robust discussion of these topics and one parent focused on the personal nature of the topics. The respondent identifying as Other politically and one liberal respondent indicated that they did not believe it should be discussed at all. Looking at the second question about including topics of gender and sexuality in the school curriculum, similar patterns emerged with three of the seven conservative/moderate conservative respondents indicating that they do not believe these topics should be included in the school curriculum. Of the remaining four responses, three shared that they believe topics of gender and sexuality should also be included in discussions at home. Of the seven

liberal/moderate liberal responses, one parent indicated that they did not believe these topics should be included and one left this question blank. The parent identifying as Other politically was strongly opposed to including these topics in curriculum.

Age Appropriateness for Gender and Sexuality Discussions

There is consensus across parents regardless of political orientation about the age that is most appropriate to begin discussing topics of gender and sexuality in the classroom. The earliest respondents indicated they believed topics of gender and sexuality should be discussed in school were around the fifth grade during which time students are approximately 11 to 12 years of age, with 80% of liberal respondents indicating that around this grade they would be comfortable with age-appropriate topics being discussed. 66% of conservative respondents felt that between fifth and seventh grade was an appropriate time to begin these discussions, and 33% believed that the age of 16, or high school, was most appropriate. It is important to note that as illustrated in the above section, parents felt that these age ranges were appropriate if the topics were focused on "puberty" and the "basics". For example, Parent 9, a liberal parent of two elementary-aged children, who did not believe these topics should be included in the school curriculum shared that

> "I tend to agree with the 5th grade puberty conversation but I do feel that anything beyond that is at the discretion of the parents. Children are not the same and while some may have conversations earlier than others, I plan on letting my children tell me when they are ready for the conversation, based on their actions and questions."

Similarly, Parent 7, a moderative conservative parent who believed that topics should be taught from a biblical stance shared that they thought the start of puberty was appropriate for these discussions but that it was up to each parent/guardian.

Support for Oklahoma Bathroom Bill

A currently contested issue in education policy around gender and sexuality is the passing and support for 'bathroom bills' in public schools. In 2022, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt signed Senate Bill 615 into law which "requires students at public schools and public charter schools to use restrooms and locker rooms that match the sex listed on their birth certificates" (Rose & LeBlanc, 2022). School districts and charter schools who do not comply with the policy outlined in the law risk having their funding reduced by five percent the following year. In the 2024 Oklahoma education polling data, Oklahoma residents were asked about their level of support for this law and approximately 74% of respondents indicated they either strongly or somewhat supported this measure. Yet, there is a clear divide on this issue when looking at support across political lines as 92% of republicans, but only 35% of democrats indicated support for this law (Hamlin, 2024).

Looking specifically at support for this law by parental status, 72% of the 218 parents in this study indicated support for this law. However, republican parents were more than twice as likely to support this law with an overwhelming 89.5% indicating support, while democratic parents had the lowest support of all political parties at 43.2%. Notably, republican non-parents supported this law at 92.4%, the only group where non-parents showed greater, even if just slightly, support. In all other groups (democrat, independent, no preference), parenthood increased the overall support for this law compared to non-parents (Hamlin, 2024). For this specific issue, the partisan divide remains clear even among parents, indicating that political identity is a dominant factor shaping opinions on this issue, potentially more so than parental status.

While national polling data indicates clear partisan divides, the responses in this study suggest slightly more nuanced perspectives. However, political identity remains a stronger determinant of policy support, particularly regarding issues like Oklahoma's bathroom bill, where republican parents expressed significantly greater support than their democratic counterparts. This contrast reinforces that while parental identity influences perspectives on education, political affiliation often has a more dominant impact on policy preferences when it comes to issues of gender and sexuality in Oklahoma schools.

Critical Race Theory

This section of the open-ended survey included the following questions:

- What does the term "Critical Race Theory (CRT)" mean to you, and what are your thoughts on CRT in schools?
- What are your thoughts on your child learning about the history of slavery in America? Should they learn that the impacts of slavery still affect Black people today? Why or why not?

Defining Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory has become a dominant topic in education discourse in recent years, sparking intense debate among policymakers, school administrators, educators, and parents. CRT is a 40-year-old framework that grounds in the idea that "that race is a social construct, and that racism is not merely the product of individual bias or prejudice, but also something embedded in legal systems and policies" (Sawchuk, 2021). The concept of CRT has been mostly used in academic and legal sectors to better understand and address the impacts of race. The notion that schools are teaching CRT inspired the creation and subsequent signing into law of various 'anti-CRT' laws, including here in the state of Oklahoma. In May 2021, Governor Kevin Stitt signed

House Bill 1775 into law, and while the bill does not directly cite Critical Race Theory, it is often referred to as an anti-CRT bill in public discourse and news media. The law includes the following eight banned concepts that are unable to be taught in Oklahoma classrooms:

- One race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex.
- An individual, by virtue of their race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.
- An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of their race or sex.
- Members of one race or sex cannot and should not attempt to treat others without respect [based on] race or sex.
- An individual's moral character is determined by their race or sex.
- An individual, by virtue of their race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex.
- Any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of their race or sex.
- Meritocracy or traits such as a hard work ethic are racist or sexist or were created by members of a particular race to oppress members of another race.

Failure to comply with House Bill 1775 can result in consequences for a school district's accreditation status, as occurred with Tulsa and Mustang Public Schools in 2022 (Korth, 2022).

To better understand Oklahoma parent perspective on this issue, participants in this study were asked to define CRT and its role in the classroom. Of the seven conservative/moderate conservative responses, only one respondent shared a definition writing that CRT was "how racism effect[s] society today", while three of the seven responses indicated they had no idea

what CRT was. The remaining three responses did not directly share a definition of CRT, but instead only answered the second component of this question about CRT and its place in schools, sharing overall disagreement and skepticism for how race is being discussed in the classroom. Parent 6, a moderate conservative parent of one elementary aged student from an urban community, does not believe CRT should be taught in schools and that schools should "stick with facts not opinions". Parent 5, a conservative parent of three elementary and high-school aged children from a rural community, shared that they believe CRT is a concept "Made up by the government to induce fear through the media. There is a problem and it is a POVERTY problem not as much as a race problem until the media makes it a race problem". Similarly, Parent 7, the parent of one high school student from an urban area shared that while they can see potential benefits, they are not supportive of any movement that seeks to villainize white people sharing,

> "I see the benefit of this, but it also villainize white people. With this, I disagree with the movement. I love teaching about diversity, but if it is geared to make white people "less than," then i will never subscribe to that movement"

The respondent who identified politically as Other shared similar thoughts to their conservative counterparts, citing a political motive behind CRT and similarly want education to ground in 'facts' sharing that CRT is,

> "It is political propaganda/brainwashing that is weaponizing education, targeting uneducated children in disguise of good intentions. I oppose CRT and persuasive education teach facts and critical thinking ie teach how to think not what to think"

Looking across party lines, of the seven liberal/moderate liberal responses, four of the seven respondents put forth a definition, while the remaining three either left this question blank or

indicated they did not know. Across the four definitions shared by respondents, they indicated that they believed CRT to be a way to understand how race and racism impact opportunities and inequality in our nation.

What and how to teach about race, race relations, and racial justice in K-12 schools is a hotly debated topic in education and opinions are deeply shaped by political and social identities. Significant partisan divides influencing perspectives on curriculum content seem to exist with or without knowledge of CRT being a factor. Republican and democratic parents differ sharply in their views on whether and how topics like systemic racism and slavery should be taught, with conservatives advocating for restrictions and liberals supporting a more inclusive approach (Horowitz, 2022; Lin et al., 2024). Widespread understanding of CRT remains limited, yet partisan disagreements persist, particularly over curriculum content and delivery in classrooms (Duran, 2021; Lin et al., 2024). National polling that asked specifically about CRT found that 35% of Americans support state laws banning the teaching of CRT, with republicans significantly more likely to favor such bans (Duran, 2021).

Teaching about the Impacts of Slavery

While varied opinions emerged about what CRT is and its role in the classroom, 100% of respondents across both political ideologies signaled strong support for their child learning about the history of slavery in America, though variance can be seen across groups in the framing and context of this topic. From all 15 responses about what respondents believe their child should learn about slavery, the following themes emerged:

- Teaching that slavery was an essential part of American history
- Teaching about slavery to prevent history from repeating
- Understanding the ongoing impact of slavery

- Teaching slavery to promote awareness and racial acceptance

Analyzing responses by political identity, partisan divides emerge. Conservative-leaning and Other respondents agree that the history of slavery should be taught but note that it should be taught from a broad historical perspective, and not politically charged. Parent 7 shared that while they believe in teaching the history of slavery, they "believe in also not teaching my son that he is not a victim." Two respondents, Parent 5 and Parent 15 also indicated that they believe children should learn about more than just slavery in America, sharing that it is important to learn about the topic holistically so as not to repeat history. Parent 5 shared specifically that they believe children should learn about modern-day slavery and the impacts of poverty on people today writing,

> "…slavery is horrible and still happens today even in America through Satanic Ritual Abuse, Human trafficking, and forced labor. It also happens in other countries as well. I believe that children should learn the horrors of slavery throughout Americas history so it is not repeated. I believe that slavery did put people of color at a poverty disadvantage and people who are still stuck in that cycle are reaping the negative consequences still. All of the American people are in bondage to the Federal Reserve (which is a joke)- perpetuating the cycle of poverty further."

And Parent 15 shared that teaching about slavery confined to America history only may further push a political agenda by focusing on one race writing,

> "Children should learn about slavery in America as well as the world. Comparative learning and data analysis to recognize trends and understand long term effects of all major historical events shaping societies including the positive and negatives of governance. It is misleading and racially bias to teach/focus specific to one race and

disregard parallels to push a political agenda. United we stand, divided we learn? No divided we fall/fail which is what is occurring across the US education system." Conversely, those respondents identifying as liberal/liberal leaning noted that they see teaching the history of slavery as non-negotiable using qualifiers such as "crucial" and "absolutely" with one respondent, Parent 12, stating "Absolutely, how is this even debatable? It's our history and we are still experiencing the impact of it. Further, the liberal/liberal leaning responses focused more on the importance of teaching children about the ongoing impacts of slavery and overall racial awareness and acceptance. Parent 9 and Parent 13 both voiced their support around teaching this topic and noted specifically the concept of racial awareness and acceptance respectively. Parent 9, a liberal parent of two elementary aged students from a suburban area shared, "They absolutely should be taught about the history of slavery in America. It is a part of our history. We shouldn't be avoiding teaching a part of our history because it is hard for some races to deal with." and Parent 13, a moderate liberal parent of two elementary aged students from an urban area said "I think it's important so that history does not repeat itself. My children go to school with several different races & acceptance is important to our household."

The political divides that exist in survey respondents are also reflected in national polling data with 84% of democratic parents supporting schools teaching about the history of racism in America, compared to only 43% of republican parents and 76% of democrats supporting discussions on the ongoing effects of racism, while 25% of Republicans parents agree (Horowitz, 2022). 78% of those polled supported teaching high school students about the impacts of slavery, with support higher amond Democrats at 86% and republicans at 73%. Furthermore, 73% of democrats supported teaching about the impact of racism in the U.S. compared to 58% of republicans (Duran, 2021).

A key similarity across participant answers was that all respondents, regardless of political orientation, supported teaching about slavery in American history in some form, Differences emerged in how this content should be framed with conservative and politically unaffiliated respondents preferring a broader historical perspective that avoids what they perceive as politically charged narratives. Liberal respondents saw the teaching of slavery as non-negotiable, emphasizing its ongoing impacts and the importance of racial awareness.

Political identities were more pronounced when asked about CRT and systemic racism with republican and conservative-leaning parents often express skepticism or outright opposition to what they perceived as politically motivated lessons and curricula and democratic and liberal leaning parents being more open to discussion of racial inequality. While divisions existed regardless of the mention of CRT, the term remained politically divisive and may elicit a reaction more in line with a parent's political social identity than that of a parent or guardian.

Religion in School

This last section of the open-ended survey included the following questions:

- What is your perspective on religion in public schools?
- What are your thoughts about teachers using religious texts as a teaching tool?

Appropriateness of Religion in School

The range of responses around respondent perspectives about religion in public schools is nuanced, with most conservative respondents and a little more than half of liberal respondents signaling support for teaching broadly about religion. Of the 15 respondents, 66% of parents believe that it is appropriate for religion to be taught in schools with a few caveats. Parents indicate that no one religion should be focused on, and that teaching should stay focused on the 'basics' and 'informational' content. Parent 10, a liberal parent of one elementary aged student

who is a teacher in a rural school community, shares that content should stay solely focused on informational material,

> "Students can have whatever religion they choose, and teachers can teach informational about religion, but that's an about all that should happen. I have taken a field trip to a mosque, and in previous curriculum we have learned about the Catholic Church"

National polling shows that over 50% of parents do not support teachers leading prayers in schools (Horowitz, 2022). 59% of republican parents did support some form pf prayer being led in schools, with 29% supporting strictly Christian prayer. 63% of democratic parents oppose any prayer being led in schools (Horowitz, 2022). Similar to this study's respondents there were some national polling sentiments (27%) of parents that felt prayer in school was acceptable as long as any religion could participate (Horowitz, 2022).

Religious Texts as a Teaching Tool

The final question in the open-ended survey asked respondents to consider their perspectives on teachers using religious texts as a teaching tool. In alignment with their views on the appropriateness of including religion as a topic in the classroom, 66% of respondents indicated that they would be comfortable with using religious texts as a teaching tool given specific conditions are met such as in a religion class or as a historical document. Emergent themes from those responses include:

- Using religious texts to teach about multiple religions and worldviews
- Concerns about religious texts being used to promote specific beliefs
- Using religious texts as optional/elective courses
- Using texts as historical and literary documents

Despite the Bible already being an approved text for use in Oklahoma schools as a teaching tool, State Superintendent Ryan Walters issued a mandate that would schools to begin using the Bible in lesson plans for 5th-12th grade students (Murphy, 2023). While this mandate may appeal to those parents that share a political in-group that would support more explicit teaching of the Bible in Oklahoma schools, respondents in this study felt that religious texts should represent a wider range of religions.

Support for Religious Charter Schools

According to the 2024 Oklahoma education poll support for school choice emerged with 53% of respondents indicating they support the creation of religious charter schools. Yet, as seen with responses to the support for the Oklahoma bathroom bill, support for religious charter schools varies starkly across political lines with 71% of republicans supporting religious charter schools, and only 18% of democrats indicating their support (Hamlin, 2024). Republican respondents signaled support for the creation of charter schools at a slightly lower rate than support for religious charters schools at 57% and democrats at a slightly higher rate of 33% (Hamlin, 2024).

Breaking this data down even further by parental status, republican non-parents support religious charter schools at 72.2% while non-parents were 3.8% less likely to signal support at 68.4% (Hamlin, 2024). It is important to note, however, that republicans consistently exhibited the highest levels of support across both parents and non-parents when compared to other political affiliations (Hamlin, 2024). Democratic respondents had the lowest rates of support across both parents and non-parents, though the impact of being a parent increased support for religious charter schools by 16.2%, with parent support at 29.7% (Hamlin, 2024). Approximately 45% of independent and no preference parent groups signaled support for religious charter

schools and parenthood increased their support by 12% and 2.6%, respectively, from the non-parent groups (Hamlin, 2024). These data would suggest that the social identity of being a parent may increase support for religious charter schools, however, when the data are broken down along political lines the gap is still quite large between republicans and democrats.

Summary of Findings

While political polarization significantly influences perspectives on education, social identities as parents or guardians can sometimes moderate polarized views. The findings from this study and national polling data indicate clear partisan divides between republican and democratic parents on various education issues. While parent and guardian perceptions of educational terms and issues remained polarized on many issues, responses did reveal areas of commonality across political lines when parents were considering these topics through the lens of personal experiences based on their child's education and schooling. This supports the idea that social identity as a parent may shift perspectives from strict partisan divides, if only slightly. In this study, parental perceptions were similar regardless of political party for the following topic areas: the importance of high-quality education, the role of parents in supporting their child's learning, and perceptions about Social Emotional Learning. Conversely, in this study the following topic areas saw parental perceptions generally remain divided across political lines: increasing public education funding, increasing teacher salary, gender and sexuality, religion in schools/religious charter schools, and Critical Race Theory. Notably, even within the topics that remained generally politically polarized, there were a few instances of similarity among parent responses across political lines, suggesting that there may be less division around core values in education.

Democratic parents tend to be more satisfied with public education, citing strong teacher-student relationships and inclusive curricula, while republican parents report lower satisfaction due to concerns about curriculum content, ideological bias, and parental control, a divide reflected in national polling where 53% of democrats and only 33% of republicans expressed satisfaction with K-12 education quality (Gallup, 2024). 73% of parents of all political orientations surveyed for this study expressed being satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of education their child is receiving and support for individualized learning, hands-on experiences, and strong teacher-student relationships in order for their children to experience high-quality education. While overall satisfaction with public education quality was high among parents in the study, conservative/moderate conservative parents were slightly less satisfied at 71% satisfaction, compared to their liberal/moderate liberal counterparts at 86% satisfaction. All parents expressed a strong belief that they should play an active role in their child's education.

Support for increases in public education funding and teacher salaries followed similar trajectories with the 2024 Oklahoma education poll indicating 73% of respondents support increasing public school funding, while 76% favor raising teacher salaries with parents and guardians expressing slightly higher support than non-parents (Hamlin, 2024). Partisan divides remain as 90% of democrats supported increasing teacher salaries and 91% supported increasing school funding, compared to 72% and 64% of republicans, respectively, suggesting parenthood may moderate partisan differences on education funding.

The findings from this study suggest that parental involvement in school communities plays a key role in how informed parents feel about educational terms and issues, regardless of political orientation. 80% of respondents reported feeling informed or very informed, with both conservative- and liberal-leaning parents relying on direct sources such as school emails, PTA

meetings, and communication with principals to stay updated. However, political identity influenced perceptions of the reliability of educational information, as liberal parents consistently reported feeling well-informed, while conservative parents exhibited more variation, with some expressing skepticism and frustration toward the education system, viewing it as “chaotic” or “failing”. Additionally, when asked about media influence on their educational perspectives, 73% of respondents indicated they do not rely on national media outlets or political figures, citing a general distrust of their agendas. Instead, parents reported forming opinions based on peer discussions and personal experiences within their own school communities.

Social Emotional Learning remains a widely supported concept among parents with specific terminology and framing able to influence parent perceptions across political lines. In this study, 73% of respondents could define SEL, with common themes including developing social skills, understanding emotions, and building self-awareness. National polling echoes these findings, showing that while some parents are skeptical of the term SEL, they largely support the underlying concepts (Committee for Children, 2022; Prothero, 2021; Tyner, 2021). When asked about the importance of SEL, 86% of respondents felt some form of social skill building was crucial for their child’s education, and even those unfamiliar with the term initially expressed support for teaching "social and emotional skills.” Again, this trend aligns with national research indicating that parents may be more receptive to terms like "soft skills" or "life skills" instead of SEL, particularly among republicans, who are more likely to express skepticism toward the term itself (Prothero, 2021; Tyner, 2021). The lack of a strong partisan divide in this study suggests that parental identity may override political affiliation when considering SEL concepts in relation to their child’s education, though broader political discourse continues to shape perceptions of its terminology.

While liberal and conservative parents approached discussions of gender and sexuality more aligned to their respective parties' stances, both groups agreed that discussions should also take place in the child's home and that most discussions in school should not begin until around puberty. This example illustrates that while political identity remains more salient than parental identity for this topic, the identity as parent does lead to a more nuanced opinion than simply polling would indicate. Democratic parents are more open to gender identity and sexuality discussions in schools, supporting inclusive policies and LGBTQ+ education, while republican parents favor restrictions, preferring a focus on biological and puberty-related lessons over broader LGBTQ+ topics. National polling shows that 54% of Americans support giving parents the option to opt-out of LGBTQ+ lessons, agreement among the majority of those polled with stronger support among republicans (Lin et al., 2024). According to the Oklahoma education survey, republican parents overwhelmingly support restrictions on restroom use based on assigned sex at birth (89.5%), while only 43.2% of democratic parents share this view, making it one of the most strongly partisan issues in education with little overlap between groups (Hamlin, 2024).

Critical Race Theory remains a politically divisive topic among parents, with partisan differences shaping perceptions of its role in education. While CRT is an academic framework that examines how racism is embedded in legal systems and policies, its presence in K-12 education has been widely debated, leading to legislative actions such as Oklahoma's House Bill 1775, which restricts discussions on race in classrooms (Korth, 2022; Sawchuk, 2021). Among conservative and moderate conservative respondents, most either could not define CRT or viewed it as politically motivated rhetoric rather than an educational framework, with some rejecting its inclusion in schools entirely. In contrast, liberal and moderate liberal respondents

generally defined CRT as a way to understand racial inequality and its ongoing impact. When asked about teaching the history of slavery, all respondents supported its inclusion in schools, but differences emerged in how it should be framed. Conservative respondents favored a broad historical approach that avoided political narratives, while liberal respondents emphasized the need to teach slavery's ongoing impact. These findings align with national polling, which shows 84% of democratic parents support teaching about racism's history in America, compared to only 43% of republican parents (Horowitz, 2022). Similarly, 73% of democrats support teaching about racism's impact today, compared to 25% of republicans (Duran, 2021). These results suggest that political identity heavily influences parental views on race-related curriculum, with conservative parents favoring restrictions and liberal parents advocating for a more inclusive approach. However, the shared support for teaching slavery in some capacity highlights a potential area of common ground across ideological divides.

The findings suggest that parental perspectives on religion in public schools vary based on political affiliation, with conservatives generally more supportive of religious instruction than liberals. While 66% of respondents supported teaching religion in schools, they emphasized that instruction should remain neutral and inclusive of multiple faiths. National polling reflects similar trends, with 59% of republican parents supporting some form of prayer in schools, compared to 63% of democrats who oppose it (Horowitz, 2022). Regarding the use of religious texts as teaching tools, most respondents agreed that they could be used in a historical or literary context rather than for promoting specific beliefs. However, state policies such as Oklahoma's mandate requiring Bible instruction in public schools remain controversial, with conservative respondents more likely to support such measures. The debate over religious charter schools also highlights stark political divides, with 71% of republicans supporting their creation, compared to

only 18% of democrats (Hamlin, 2024; Murphy, 2023). Additionally, parental status appears to influence opinions on religious charter schools, with support increasing among parents across all political affiliations. However, the gap between republican and democratic support remains substantial, suggesting that while social identity as a parent may influence attitudes, political affiliation remains a dominant factor in shaping perspectives on religion in education (Hamlin, 2024).

While political identity remains a dominant factor in shaping educational opinions, parental identity can serve as a moderating influence on certain issues, particularly when discussions are framed around student well-being rather than partisan narratives. Parents across political lines prioritize practical, student-centered, concerns, including education quality, teacher relationships, and individualized learning experiences. Despite conservative skepticism toward the term SEL, parents broadly support the teaching of social emotional skills when framed as essential life skills. Similarly, while disagreements persist around framing, parents generally agree on age-appropriate introductions to gender, sexuality, and the history of slavery and race relations in America. Additionally, parents—regardless of political affiliation—express greater support for public education funding and teacher salary increases compared to their non-parent political counterparts. While differences existed in the degree to which parents and guardians supported various aspects of education, often along political party lines, those differences were not always as stark as national polling suggests, indicating that social identity as a parent can soften political polarization in some areas. These findings align with Social Identity Theory by demonstrating how parental identity can shape attitudes independently from political ideology, creating opportunities for more nuanced and constructive discussions about public education (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Chapter Six: Discussion

Political polarization has become deeply embedded in American public discourse, influencing perspectives on a range of social, cultural, and policy issues—including education (Abramowitz, 2010; Bafumi & Shapiro, 2009; Pew Research Center, 2017). This study sought to examine how social identity can shape parent and guardian perceptions of currently debated educational terms and issues. Through open-ended surveys, this study aimed to use qualitative research to build upon existing polling data by exploring the nuanced responses of parents and guardians and their attitudes toward education in an era of heightened political division. While political polarization has certainly impacted education debates today, this study highlights the potential for more nuanced discussions when parents engage with these issues through the lens of their personal experiences. In this regard, Social Identity Theory provided an ideal theoretical framework for better understanding the influences and motivations behind parent and guardian perceptions and opinion. Social Identity Theory can help illuminate the competing influences of multiple in- and out-groups parents and guardians may identify with and illustrates that these identities can intersect and contradict one another when it comes to ideological beliefs and personal experiences.

The findings of this study suggest that while political polarization plays a significant role in shaping parental perspectives on educational issues, these opinions are not entirely fixed, and social identities may play a role in shifting perspectives based on context. Consistent with prior polling research, many parents and guardians expressed views that aligned with their political affiliations when discussing currently debated educational terms and issues (Hatfield, 2023; Hurst, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). However, this study also found evidence that divisions based on political orientation were less stark among parents and

guardians when discussing these issues through the lens of their own experiences with their children's education.

Through analysis of open-ended surveys, it became apparent that when parents considered educational issues from the perspective of their role as guardians rather than through a partisan lens, their responses often shared more similarities than differences. Some participants who initially framed their opinions in terms of broader political narratives later expressed more moderate or even contradictory views when reflecting on their own children's schooling experiences. This aligns with research suggesting that while political identity heavily influences public discourse, parental satisfaction with local education and schools is often higher when questions are framed outside of national political conflicts (Houston, 2021; Kamenetz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021).

Overall, the analysis of the survey responses illustrated that participants across the political spectrum held opinions that were less divisive than national polling data would indicate. There are examples of this pattern across all survey questions, with the highest levels of consensus across parents and political orientations occurring within the topics such as the importance of high-quality education, the role of parents in supporting their child's learning, and perceptions about Social Emotional Learning. The topics of Critical Race Theory, public education funding, and satisfaction of parental influence on their child's education had the most variation across political orientation. The topic of gender and sexuality shared some similarities around age appropriateness and depth of discussions, but there were differences across political lines about what the content should be grounded in. While there were a few outliers, the majority of responses were very similar based on which political party the participant identified with.

These findings indicate that parental perspectives about education can be influenced by social identity and that individuals may express different opinions depending on whether they identify first with their political in-group or their role as a parent or guardian. While political polarization remains a powerful force in shaping educational debates, this study highlights the complexity of parental perceptions and the potential for more nuanced discussions when educational issues are considered outside of the broader partisan divide.

This study found that political orientation remains a powerful social identity for parents and guardians, particularly when discussing educational topics such as Critical Race Theory, gender and sexuality, and religion in schools. Despite parents and guardians largely aligning with their political in-groups, particularly in national polling, there are areas where parent social identity may adhere less strictly to political party beliefs based on engaged interactions with their child's school community.

The Influence of Social Identity on Parent and Guardian Perceptions

The study's findings support the idea that social identity, either that of political affiliation, parental status, or the intersection of the two, plays a crucial role in shaping opinions on educational terms and issues. Despite the evidence that political identity has become a dominant in-group affiliation, especially in the context of education, parent and guardian responses in this study also demonstrated that parental identity may serve as a competing or even moderating influence on education issues such as SEL, the role of parents in supporting their child's learning, and the importance of high-quality education. Parental identity may have also contributed to the softening of attitudes in areas that remain deeply divided nationally such as teaching about the history of slavery, religion in schools, and gender and sexuality education,

particularly when discussed along with contextual factors such as curriculum details and grade level of lessons.

While national polling suggests strong partisan opposition to SEL, parents in this study generally expressed support for teaching social and emotional skills in schools, even when initially skeptical of the terminology (Committee for Children, 2022; Prothero, 2021; Tyner, 2021). Parents and guardians uncomfortable with the label of SEL still emphasized the importance of teaching children interpersonal skills, emotional regulation, and social awareness, indicating that partisan opposition to the term itself does not necessarily translate into opposition to the concept (Hatfield, 2023). Specifically, republican-leaning parents were more likely to express skepticism toward SEL as a formal program but still supported teaching "soft skills" and emotional intelligence (Committee for Children, 2022; Prothero, 2021). Parents and guardians in this study generally agreed on the importance of teaching social and emotional skills regardless of political orientation. Parents and guardians were often supportive of its underlying principles of helping children develop interpersonal and emotional regulation skills.

Across all political affiliations, parents strongly believed they should play an active role in their child's education. Conservative parents have been shown to be less satisfied with the amount of control and input they have typically had in relation to curriculum (Horowitz, 2024), all parents, regardless of political orientation, agreed that parent engagement was critical to their child's success. This reflects national polling with republican parents more likely to believe they lack influence over what their child learns, while democratic parents report higher satisfaction with their perceived amount of input and control (Horowitz, 2022). When asked directly about what education involvement looks like for parents and guardians in this study, answers were largely similar. Descriptions shared the need for behaviors and responsibilities such as assisting

with homework, communicating with teachers, encouraging good behavior, and advocating for their child.

When parents were asked about what constitutes a high-quality education, their responses were remarkably similar across political lines with an emphasis on concepts such as individualized and hands-on learning, critical thinking and problem-solving, student well-being, and high-quality, caring teachers. Conservative parents expressed slightly lower satisfaction with public schools overall while liberal parents were more likely to express strong satisfaction, but all parents expressed positive engagement with teachers and school leadership in their personal experiences. These results mirror national and state polling that shows a general dissatisfaction with public education, but with parents of school-aged children reporting much higher levels of satisfaction compared to non-parents (Brenan, 2023; Gallup, 2024; Hamlin, 2024; Minkin, 2024). This further suggests that personal experiences and direct involvement in a child's education can offset political opinions that may otherwise be held, and that ideological polarization may not be as strong a factor in the formation of perceptions of education-related terms and issues.

Persistent Political Divides

Despite areas of shared concern among parents, political social identity remains a dominant factor in shaping opinions on certain education policies, particularly those perceived as tied to broader political and cultural debates. This was most evident in parent responses to Oklahoma's bathroom bill, which requires students to use restrooms that align with the sex listed on their birth certificate, CRT, and policies surrounding religious charter schools (Hamlin 2024).

Discussions of gender and sexuality in schools remain highly polarized. Oklahoma's bathroom bill was particularly divisive with republicans polling at 92% in support compared to

35% of democrats indicating support (Hamlin, 2024). Still, parental identity moderates this divide with parental perceptions of all political orientations aligning in certain ways within this topic. Areas of agreement include age appropriateness of lessons and parent involvement, with discussion/curriculum content still being divided. Most parents preferred any gender and sexuality discussions to begin around 5th to 7th grade, rather than earlier, regardless of political affiliation. Both conservative and liberal parents expressed a preference for these topics to also be addressed at home, reinforcing the parent's role in shaping their child's understanding. However, conservative parents were more likely to emphasize biology and puberty-focused lessons, whereas liberal parents were more open to broader discussions on gender identity. These findings align with national polling data, which show that republican parents overwhelmingly support restrictions on LGBTQ+ topics in schools, while democratic parents favor inclusivity (Lin et al., 2024; Parker et al., 2022). However, the shared belief in appropriate age instruction suggests room for compromise.

Responses to CRT demonstrated how political identity influences perceptions of what is being taught in schools. While many conservative-leaning parents opposed CRT, some acknowledged the importance of teaching about slavery and racial injustice in American history. Differences in parental perceptions emerged along partisan lines in how they believed it should be framed with conservative parents favoring a broader historical narrative, while liberal parents emphasized the ongoing impact of slavery, viewing it as essential for fostering racial awareness. All the parents surveyed in this study agreed that understanding history helps prevent its repetition, showing some common ground despite ideological differences. However, conservative parents were more likely to express concerns that discussions of race could be framed in ways that vilify certain groups, while liberal parents saw an emphasis on systemic

racism as essential to understanding contemporary inequalities. The differences in survey responses and national and Oklahoma polling suggest that perspectives may shift when educational terms and issues are discussed on a more personal, local level, but those same individuals may retain more politically divided opinions on the same issues when presented as debates on the efficacy of education nationally. National polling suggests republican parents are less likely than democrats to support discussions of systemic racism but a majority in both groups support teaching about slavery (Horowitz, 2022; Duran, 2021).

Similar trends are seen when parents and guardians were surveyed about the role of religion in public education. Republican parents supported prayer in schools at much higher rates than democratic parents (Horowitz, 2022), the study findings suggest that when framed as academic rather than devotional, support increased across political lines. Parents and guardians surveyed supported using varied religious texts as historical or literary documents across political lines. The majority of parents indicated they were more comfortable with comparative religious studies rather than focusing on one religion's text or religious practice in schools.

Framing of Educational Terms and Issues

The framing of educational terms and issues played a role in parent and guardian perceptions with many parents expressing agreement with the concepts underlying those terms and issues they were surveyed about. Parents and guardians in the study generally considered themselves well informed even if they were unfamiliar with certain terms such as CRT or SEL. Parents commented on getting most of their information about their child's education from teachers, principals, and their school community. These parents also expressed satisfaction with the amount of information received. This suggests that the source of information may play an important role in framing educational terms and issues, with information coming from a trusted

relationship creating a less divisive perception than receiving information from a more politically driven outlet.

Implications for Education Policy and Leadership

Recent polling and research reveal that public education has become a focal point for deepening political polarization in the United States. Issues such as Social Emotional Learning, Critical Race Theory, gender and sexuality, and religion in schools have been caught in the crosshairs of partisan debate (Brenan, 2023; Hatfield, 2023; Horowitz, 2022; Minkin, 2024; Odabaş & Aragao, 2023). While republican and conservative leaning parents often express skepticism toward terms like SEL or CRT, they still tend to support underlying concepts such as teaching emotional regulation, goal setting, and empathy when those ideas are separated from politicized labels (Horowitz, 2022; Prothero, 2021; Tyner, 2021). Moreover, many parents, regardless of political identity, report higher satisfaction with their own children's schools compared to their views on the national education system, suggesting a disconnect between political narratives and lived experiences (Kamenetz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021; Houston, 2021).

This divide reflects a long history of educational controversy in the U.S., where debates around equity, federal versus local control, and curriculum reform have been persistent themes (Rury, 2012). Recent policy developments, such as President Trump's call to dismantle the Department of Education and legislation like Florida's restrictions on teaching about race and gender, have brought education policy into even sharper political focus (Bender, 2025; Bender et al., 2025; Gecker, 2023). Additionally, politically motivated attacks on schools have cost districts billions of dollars and placed emotional strain on educators and administrators, leading to staff resignations, mental health challenges, and a redirection of resources away from teaching

and learning (Beckett, 2024). These developments demonstrate how national political strategies have continued to transform education from a local or community issue into a partisan national political battleground (Beckett, 2024; Rogers, as cited in Beckett, 2024).

Research has consistently shown an increase in ideological divides over time, with contentious debates surrounding topics such as SEL, CRT, gender and sexuality, and the role of religion in public education (Horowitz, 2022; Levinson et al., 2021). While findings in this study reinforced extant research that political identity remains a large factor in shaping parental views, this study also found that social identity as a parent or guardian plays a moderating role in certain cases, sometimes leading to perspectives that are different, or less extreme, than one's political party (Houston, 2021; Kamenetz, 2022). One's social identity as a parent seems to naturally increase engagement in education, giving parents and guardians access to more information about, and experience with, educational terms and issues that may ultimately temper beliefs that may have otherwise been formed based purely on political party messaging.

Avoid Jargon and Acronyms When Communicating with Parents

As with any practice, educators have developed a language of acronyms and shorthand jargon that may be less useful for parents and the general public. Knowing that parent and guardian perceptions are influenced by the framing of educational terms and issues, such as parental preference for terms such as "life skills" over that of SEL, schools and districts should take particular care to focus on communicating educational initiatives in ways that focus on supportive concepts for students. Avoiding acronyms and practitioner terminology that may already be the focus of politically partisan rhetoric could have limiting effects on partisan perceptions. Avoiding jargon-heavy terms that may carry ideological weight and instead frame discussions around common aspirations that more clearly define services and curricula for

student success may help garner more support from parents and guardians across political orientations and other social identities.

Parent Engagement

Direct parental engagement seems to be a mitigating factor in political partisanship for educational terms and issues. Schools and districts that focus efforts on engaging their parents and wider community could have more success in building understanding and consensus of educational terms and issues, what role they play, and how they are utilized for student success. Districts and schools should seek to proactively engage parents and communities about education policies and initiatives and be open and transparent about the inclusion and content of such programs that may be politically controversial. Schools and districts should ensure the usage of expansive efforts to reach parents and guardians to share pertinent information. Schools and districts should go beyond relying solely on written communications or memos and consider creating opportunities for open dialogue through parent groups, community listening sessions, and gathering feedback through open-ended surveys.

Parent Communication about Curriculum and Leveraging Trust in Local Control

Survey responses in this study indicate that most parents and guardians get information about their child's education from their school and teachers, and that they generally trust these sources of information. This is an important aspect of parental perception formation, and one that schools can leverage to their benefit. Providing accurate and comprehensive information about curricula can help depoliticize terms and issues that have entered the political culture war by explaining the practical application and true intent of initiatives from a trusted source. Schools should also work to acknowledge parent concerns while providing facts about education initiatives to hear parent concerns without becoming embroiled in conflict. Creating this fact-

based culture of transparency for parents and guardians can help to create a buffer against polarization around educational terms and issues. Disseminating information through PTAs or other parent organizations could help foster further trust through shared community while focusing on messages around local control and choice that schools have to best serve student outcomes.

Limitations of Analysis

This study sought to provide valuable insights into how parental and political social identities shape perceptions of debated educational terms and issues. While valuable data was collected in this regard there exist several limitations that should be acknowledged. One of the primary limitations of this study was the difficulty in recruiting participants due to the politically sensitive nature of the research topic. Many potential participants were hesitant to engage, with some declining to be included even after completing the early interviews or survey. Additionally, many organizations and parent groups declined to distribute the survey due to concerns that the subject matter could be perceived as divisive. This reluctance led to a smaller and potentially less diverse participant pool, which may not have fully captured the range of perspectives present among Oklahoma parents and guardians. The small sample size may lead to even more limited generalizability of findings to the broader U.S. population as experiences and perceptions of parents and guardians in Oklahoma may not represent those of parents and guardians in other U.S. states. Although the study aimed to collect responses across various school locales (urban, suburban, and rural) and political orientation (republican, democrat, independent, and other) the limited number of participants made it difficult to ensure full representation of all demographic and ideological perspectives. As research suggests that divides in educational preferences are often more pronounced at the elementary level (Levinson et al., 2021), the findings may not be

generalizable to parents of older students given the small sample and it is unclear how results may differ when focused solely on the parent/guardians of elementary students as compared with households that may have older students as well.

Sampling bias may have occurred based on participant's political orientation. Those who chose to participate may have done so because of particularly strong opinions on these issues and those with more moderate opinions may not have opted to participate. If parents perceived this study to reflect negatively on their political party, they may have chosen to answer in a way that prioritizes their political social identity and may have tempered opinions as to minimize perceived damage that could be directed towards their chosen in-group. Participants may have answered questions with bias based on the subject matter (education) and the research being conducted by a student at an educational institution based on the in-group attitudes towards education and educational institutes. Despite the anonymous nature of the survey, parents and guardians may have answered in a biased manner to promote positive perceptions of their own child's school, district, and teachers.

This study relied primarily on qualitative data collected through open-ended surveys, which allowed for in-depth exploration of perceptions, but limited participation led to the need for more comparative data points. To address this, supplemental polling data from the Oklahoma Education Journal education poll, a random sample of 601 Oklahomans, including 218 parents, was incorporated (Hamlin, 2024). While this polling data helped to add meaningful context from other Oklahomans, the two data sources were not intentionally designed to be compared and therefore data compared does not align perfectly. While the integration of both data sets helped to provide a clearer picture of parent perceptions, it did not eliminate the limitations of the small participant pool.

Reflective Statement

As the researcher for this study examining the intersection of parent perceptions, political orientation, and educational terms and issues, I recognize the importance of acknowledging my own social identities and potential biases. Given the sensitive nature of political topics, I approached this work with a commitment to maintaining objectivity and academic rigor. Throughout this study I remained aware that my personal experiences, beliefs, and educational background could shape the way data was interpreted, and findings were framed. Multiple strategies were utilized during the research process to minimize bias, including the use of open-ended surveys and systematic coding procedures. I also compared qualitative findings with external polling data from the Oklahoma Education Journal to provide broader context and to identify patterns across sources. My goal was not to advance a particular political perspective, but rather to examine nuance within parental perceptions of education in a politically polarized environment. By maintaining transparency about my role and applying structured analytic methods, I have sought to ensure that the conclusions drawn are grounded in participant responses and accepted research practices, rather than personal opinion.

Scholarly Contributions

Open-ended surveys allowed for in depth nuanced answers in an effort to more thoroughly explain parent perceptions on currently debated educational terms and issues and how those opinions are impacted by social identity groups. This research may help to better understand how parents and guardians perceive education in general and their children's schools and teachers more specifically. This study offers contributions by expanding the understanding of how Social Identity Theory influences parental perceptions of education, through identification with different in-groups, particularly in an era of heightened political polarization.

This research may help to better understand how parents and guardians navigate multiple social identities that may conflict at times and how this intersectionality of social identities can explain seemingly contradictory perceptions in relation to educational terms and issues and their personal experiences as parents. This in turn may help educators more effectively communicate with parents about currently debated educational terms and issues.

This study adds to the extant research on social identity, education perceptions, and political ideology. Participants in this study revealed that their perceptions of educational terms and issues are based on numerous identifications and those social identities may change and influence each individual from topic to topic without one social identity dominating sense-making.

Future Research

Future research should further explore these identity-based shifts in perspective, particularly in relation to policy decisions and school governance, to better understand how to bridge ideological divides in education. Future research should expand on this work by increasing the sample size, incorporating longitudinal data to better track the shifts of politically partisan opinions over time, and/or conducting semi-structured interviews on educational issues. Future research could also focus more on the reasoning behind parents' perceptions with more probing questions about support or opposition for various educational terms and issues.

References

Abramowitz, A. I. (2010). The disappearing center: Engaged citizens, polarization, and American democracy. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Abramowitz, A.I., & Saunders, K.L. (2008). Is polarization a myth? The Journal of Politics, 70(2), 542–555. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381608080493

Anglum, J. C., Manion, A., & Varkey, S. (2023, May 22). Partisan policy preferences to improve teacher recruitment and retention. Brookings. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/partisan-policy-preferences-to-improve-teacher-recruitment-and-retention/

Arceneaux, K., Johnson, M., & Cryderman, J. (2013). Communication, persuasion, and the conditioning value of selective exposure: Like minds may unite and divide but they mostly tune out. Political Communication, 30(2), 213-231.

Attwell, K., & Smith, D. T. (2017). Parenting as politics: social identity theory and vaccine hesitant communities. International Journal of Health Governance, 22(3), 183-198.

Bafumi, J., & Shapiro, R. Y. (2009). A new partisan voter. The Journal of Politics, 71, 1-24.

Bartlett, Jackson Christopher (2022). "Navigating Social Identity in the Classroom." Center for the Advancement of Teaching Excellence at the University of Illinois Chicago. Retrieved from https://teaching.uic.edu/resources/teaching-guides/inclusive-equity-minded-teaching-practices/pronoun-usage/

Beckett, L. (2024, October 23). US public schools burned up nearly $3.2bn fending off rightwing culture attacks – report. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/oct/23/public-schools-costs-culture-wars-lgbtq-race

Bender, M. C. (2025, March 6). Why Republicans want to dismantle the Education Department. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/06/us/politics/education-department-republicans.html

Bender, M. C., Green, E. L., & Blinder, A. (2025, March 20). Trump signs order aimed at eliminating Education Dept. 'once and for all'. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2025/03/20/us/politics/trump-education-department-order.html

Bennett, K., & LeCompte, M. (1990). Theoretical and historical overview of the purposes of schooling. In K. Bennett & M. LeCompte (Eds.), How schools work, 1-34.

Billig, M., & Tajfel, H. (1973). Social categorization and similarity in intergroup behaviour. European Journal of Social Psychology, 3(1), 27-52.

Brenan, M. (2023, August 31). K-12 education satisfaction in U.S. ties record low. Gallup. https://news.gallup.com/poll/510401/education-satisfaction-ties-record-low.aspx

Brenan, M. (2024, August 30). Americans' view of U.S. education improves from 2023 low. Gallup. https://news.gallup.com/poll/649385/americans-view-education-improves-2023-low.aspx

Brezicha, K. F., Arnzen, C. J., LoBue, A., Childs, J., Germain, E., Jenkins, D. A., & Douglass, S. (2023). Political Polarization of Educational Politics and its Implications for Democratic Education. Peabody Journal of Education, 98(5), 467–471. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.ou.edu/10.1080/0161956X.2023.2261303

Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2022, November 10). How is the Democratic Party different from the Republican Party? . Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/question/How-is-the-Democratic-Party-different-from-the-Republican-Party

Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2024, February 9). gender identity. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/gender-identity

Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2024, March 5). Critical Race Theory. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/topic/critical-race-theory

Cahn, A. (2023, September 18). Americans are more pessimistic than optimistic about many aspects of the country's future. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/18/americans-are-more-pessimistic-than-optimistic-about-many-aspects-of-the-countrys-future/

Campbell, A., Converse, P. E., Miller, W. E., & Stokes, D. E. (1960). The American voter. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Clark, C. H. (2023). Civic education's relationship to affective partisan divides later in life. Education, Citizenship and Social Justice, 18(1), 37-58.

Committee for Children. (2022). New polling data show overwhelming support for social-emotional learning among parents. https://www.cfchildren.org/press/press-releases/new-polling-data-show-overwhelming-support-for-social-emotional-learning-among-parents/

Diliberti, M. K., & Schwartz, H. L. (2022). District leaders' concerns about mental health and ... - rand corporation. Rand.org. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-8.html

Doise, W., Csepeli, G., Dann, H. D., Gouge, C., Larsen, K., & Ostell, A. (1972). An experimental investigation into the formation of intergroup representations. European Journal of Social Psychology, 2(2), 202-204.

Doyle, W. R. (2007). Public opinion, partisan identification, and higher education policy. The journal of higher education, 78(4), 369-401.

Dunn, A., & Cerda, A. (2022). Anti-corporate sentiment in U.S. is now widespread in both parties. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/11/17/anti-corporate-sentiment-in-u-s-is-now-widespread-in-both-parties/

Duran, J. (2021, July 15). Reuters/Ipsos poll: Critical Race Theory—Contrary to reports, most Americans not worked up over Critical Race Theory. Ipsos. https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/reuters-ipsos-poll-critical-race-theory-2021-07-15

Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 (2015). congress.gov/114/plaws/publ95/PLAW-114publ95.pdf

Fiorina, M. P., Abrams, S. J., & Pope, J. C. (2010). Culture war? The myth of a polarized America (3rd ed.). New York, NY: Longman.

Fundamentals of sel. CASEL. (2023, October 9). https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/

Gecker, J. (2023, August 23). How Ron DeSantis used Florida schools to become a culture warrior. AP News. https://apnews.com/article/ron-desantis-education-gop-debate-723e18d19912b97696f3ad2c9d77e099#:~:text=A%20major%20theme%20of%20DeSantis,on%20racial%20and%20gender%20biases.

Greenwood, S. (2022, October 26). Parents Differ Sharply by Party Over What Their K-12 Children Should Learn in School. Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/10/26/parents-differ-sharply-by-party-over-what-their-k-12-children-should-learn-in-school/#wide-partisan-gaps-in-

views-of-how-much-influence-parents-school-boards-and-governments-have-on-what-public-k-12-schools-teach

Hamlin, D. (2024). Results From the 2024 Oklahoma Education Poll. Oklahoma Education Journal, 2(3), 32-40.

Hamlin, D. (2020). Flight to safety in deindustrialized cities: Perceptions of school safety in charter and public schools in Detroit, Michigan. Education and Urban Society, 52(3), 394-414.

Hamlin, D., & Peterson, P. E. (2018). Have states maintained high expectations for student performance? An analysis of 2017 state proficiency standards. Education Next, 18(4), 42-49.

Haslam, S. A. (2017). The social identity approach to education and learning: Identification, ideation, interaction, influence and ideology. In K. I. Mavor, M. J. Platow, & B. Bizumic (Eds.), Self and social identity in educational contexts (pp. 19–51). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315746913-ch2

Hatfield, J. (2023, June 5). Partisan divides over K-12 education in 8 charts. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/06/05/partisan-divides-over-k-12-education-in-8-charts/

Houston, D. M. (2021). Polarization and the politics of education: What moves partisan opinion?. Educational Policy, 35(4), 566-589.

Houston, D. M., Peterson, P. E., & West, M. R. (2022). Partisan Rifts Widen, Perceptions of School Quality Decline. Education Next, 23(2).

Horowitz, J. M. (2022, October 26). Parents differ sharply by party over what their K-12 children should learn in school. Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/10/26/parents-differ-sharply-by-party-over-what-their-k-12-children-should-learn-in-school/

Hurst, K. (2022, December 13). K-12 parents differ by party in how frequently they discuss certain national issues with their children. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/12/13/k-12-parents-differ-by-party-in-how-frequently-they-discuss-certain-national-issues-with-their-children/

Kamenetz, A. (2022, April 29). The Education Culture War is raging. but for most parents, it's background noise. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2022/04/29/1094782769/parent-poll-school-culture-wars

Kelly, S. (2009). Social Identity Theories and Educational Engagement. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 30(4), 449–462. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40375443

Korth, R. (2022, September 8). FAQ: What we know about teaching since Oklahoma's so-called Critical Race Theory ban went into effect. State Impact Oklahoma.

Leip, D. (2020a). 2020 presidential general election results. 2020 presidential general election results - Oklahoma. https://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/state.php?fips=40&year=2020&f=1&off=0

Levinson, M., Polikoff, M., & Saavedra, A. (2021). Survey: Americans broadly support teaching about (most) controversial topics in the classroom. The Brookings Institute. https://www.brookings.edu/articles/americans-broadly-support-teaching-about-most-controversial-topics-in-the-classroom/

Lelkes, Y. (2021). Policy over party: comparing the effects of candidate ideology and party on affective polarization. Political Science Research and Methods, 9(1), 189-196.

Lewis-Beck, M. S., Norpoth, H., Jacoby, W. G., & Weisberg, H. F. (2009). The American voter revisited. University of Michigan Press.

Lin, L., Horowitz, J. M., Hurst, K., & Braga, D. (2024, February 22). Race and LGBTQ issues in K-12 schools: What teachers, teens and the U.S. public say about current curriculum debates. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2024/02/22/race-and-lgbtq-issues-in-k-12-schools/

Lipka, M. (2016, October 3). Americans are divided over which public bathrooms transgender people should use. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/10/03/americans-are-divided-over-which-public-bathrooms-transgender-people-should-use/

McCarty, N., Poole, K. T., & Rosenthal, H. (2006). Polarized America: The dance of ideology and unequal riches. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

McGuinn, P. (2006). No Child Left Behind and the transformation of federal education policy, 1965-2005. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.

McGuinn, P. (2017). From ESEA to NCLB: The growth of the federal role and the shift to accountability. In F. M. Hess & M. Eden (Eds.), The Every Student Succeeds Act: What it means for America's schools, systems, and states (pp. 13-28). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Mcleod, S., PhD. (2023). Social Identity Theory: Definition, History, Examples, & Facts. Simply Psychology. https://www.simplypsychology.org/social-identity-theory.html

Mervosh, S., & Heyward, G. (2021, August 18). The School Culture Wars: "You Have Brought Division to us." The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/18/us/schools-covid-critical-race-theory-masks-gender.html

Mehta, J. (2025, April 3). Trump administration warns K-12 schools over DEI. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2025/04/03/nx-s1-5350978/trump-administration-warns-schools-about-dei-programs

Minkin, R. (2024, April 4). About half of Americans say public K-12 education is going in the wrong direction. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/04/04/about-half-of-americans-say-public-k-12-education-is-going-in-the-wrong-direction/

Moms for Liberty. (n.d.). Social Emotional Learning: Guide for parents. Moms for Liberty. https://portal.momsforliberty.org/resources/current-issues/sel/

Murphy, S. (2023, April 29). Oklahoma's Top Education Official Embraces Culture Wars. AP News. https://apnews.com/article/oklahoma-education-teachers-superintendent-walters-c5c55e473eaeb0c94545c8ae5753149a

Newall, M., & Diamond, J. (2022, April 29). Parents report improvements in their child's educational attainment ... Ipsos. https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/NPR-Ipsos-Parent-Child-Education-04282022

Odabaş, M., & Aragao, C. (2023, April 4). School district mission statements highlight a partisan divide over diversity, equity, and inclusion in K-12 Education. Pew Research Center's Social & Demographic Trends Project. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2023/04/04/school

Oliphant, J. B., & Cerda, A. (2023). Americans feel favorably about many federal agencies, especially the Park Service, Postal Service and NASA. Pew Research Center.

https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/03/30/americans-feel-favorably-about-many-federal-agencies-especially-the-park-service-postal-service-and-nasa/

Palmer, J. (2023, May 25). Superintendent Ryan Walters' video escalates attacks on teacher unions. Oklahoma Watch. https://oklahomawatch.org/2023/05/25/superintendent-ryan-walters-video-escalates-attacks-on-teacher-unions/

Parker, K., Horowitz, J. M., & Brown, A. (2022, June 28). Americans' complex views on gender identity and transgender issues. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2022/06/28/americans-complex-views-on-gender-identity-and-transgender-issues/

Party control of Oklahoma State Government. Ballotpedia. (2024). https://ballotpedia.org/Party_control_of_Oklahoma_state_government

Prothero, A. (2021, September 10). Parents like social-emotional learning, but not the name. Education Week. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/parents-like-social-emotional-learning-but-not-the-name/2021/08

Pew Research Center. (2017). The partisan divide on political values grows even wider. Retrieved March 9, 2021, from https://www.people-press.org/2017/10/05/the-partisan-divide-on-political-values-grows-even-wider/.

Roegman, R., Tan, K., Rice, P., & Mahoney, J. (2022). Politics, Polarization, and Politicization of Social Emotional Learning and School Boards. Editorial Review Board, 41.

Rose, A., & LeBlanc, P. (2022, May 25). Oklahoma GOP governor signs anti-transgender bathroom bill into law. CNN. https://www.cnn.com/2022/05/25/politics/oklahoma-anti-transgender-bathroom-law-signed-stitt/index.html

Rudolph, T. J., & Hetherington, M. J. (2021). Affective polarization in political and nonpolitical settings. International Journal of Public Opinion Research, 33(3), 591-606.

Rury, J. L. (2012). Education and social change: Contours in the history of American schooling. Routledge.

Sawchuk, S. (2021, May 18). What is Critical Race Theory, and why is it under attack? Education Week. https://www.edweek.org/leadership/what-is-critical-race-theory-and-why-is-it-under-attack/2021/05

Scheepers, D., N. Ellemers, and Vliek M.L.W Sassenbert K. “Social Identity Theory.” Social Psychology in Action: Evidence-Based Interventions from Theory to Practice. Springer, 2019. 129–143. Print.

Sprunt, B. (2023, March 24). What a House GOP messaging bill could spell for 2024 Culture War Campaign. NPR. https://www.npr.org/2023/03/24/1165592471/what-a-house-gop-messaging-bill-could-spell-for-2024-culture-war-campaign

Tajfel, H., & Billic, M. (1974). Familiarity and categorization in intergroup behavior. Journal of experimental social psychology, 10(2), 159-170.

Tajfel, H., Turner, J. C., Austin, W. G., & Worchel, S. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. Organizational identity: A reader, 56(65), 9780203505984-16.

Taylor, Jessica. (2017). Republicans And Democrats Don’t Agree, Or Like Each Other — And It’s Worse Than Ever. NPR.org. https://www.npr.org/2017/10/05/555685136/republicans-and-democrats-dont-agree-dont-like-each-other-and-its-worst-than-eve

The Economist. (2022, July 14). Schools for scandal. The Economist. https://www.economist.com/interactive/united-states/2022/07/14/critical-race-theory-is-being-weaponised-whats-the-fuss-about

Turner, J. C. (1975). Social comparison and social identity: Some prospects for intergroup behaviour. European journal of social psychology, 5(1), 1-34.

Turner, J. C., & Oakes, P. J. (1986). The significance of the social identity concept for social psychology with reference to individualism, interactionism and social influence. British Journal of Social Psychology, 25(3), 237-252.

Tyner, A. (2021). How to Sell SEL: Parents and the Politics of Social-Emotional Learning. Thomas B. Fordham Institute.

US Department of Education (ED). (2023, May 15). *Guidance on constitutionally protected prayer and religious expression in public elementary and Secondary Schools*. Home. https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/religionandschools/prayer_guidance.html

West, E. A., & Iyengar, S. (2022). Partisanship as a social identity: Implications for polarization. Political Behavior, 44(2), 807-838.

Wilson, Heidi. (2023). *National survey reveals parents' mindsets as the 2022-2023 school year ends*. National Parent Teacher Association. https://www.pta.org/home/About-National-Parent-Teacher-Association/PTA-Newsroom/news-list/news-detail-page/2023/06/16/national-survey-reveals-parents-mindsets-as-the-2022-2023-school-year-ends

Zalaznick, M. (2023). *Latest PTA survey reveals how parents are feeling after the 2022-23 school year*. District Administration. https://districtadministration.com/national-pta-parents-mindsets-survey-2022-23-school-year/

Zaller, J. R. (1992). The nature and origins of mass opinion. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Zimmerman, J. (2022). Whose America?: Culture wars in the public schools. University of Chicago Press.

Appendix A: Survey Consent Form

Dear Parent,

I am Graydon Morris, a doctoral candidate in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Oklahoma. I am administering a confidential survey to capture parent perceptions of educational issues based on political orientation. I anticipate that around 50 parents will participate in the study. Participation is voluntary.

If you agree to participate, you will complete an open-ended survey that lasts between 15-20 minutes. Your identity will remain anonymous. There is no information that will make it possible to identify you.

Data will be stored securely, and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to records. Data are collected via an online platform not hosted by OU that has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential.

Your data will not be shared or used in future research projects. In the event data are accidentally released, deductive re-identification might be a potential risk. You can contact the University of Oklahoma - Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irg@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints. By providing information to the researchers, I am agreeing to participate.

Please indicate below whether you choose to participate.

- Yes
- No

Appendix B: Qualtrics Survey Questions

This next section will ask you specific questions about your views and experiences with your child's school. Please type your responses.

1. When you think about the term "high quality education," what specific aspects come to mind, and how do you believe it is reflected in your child's school?
2. How satisfied are you with the overall quality of the education your child is receiving at school?
3. In your opinion, what role should parents play in their child's education, and how do you personally contribute to your child's education?
4. How satisfied are you with the amount of input that you have in what your child learns at their school?
5. How informed do you feel about educational terms and issues, and where do you primarily get your information?
6. Are there specific national leaders or media outlets that influence your perspective as a parent/guardian on education, and if so, how have they shaped your views?

Opinions about Educational Terms and Issues: This next section will ask your specific opinions about a few commonly discussed terms and issues. Please type your responses.

7. What does the term "Social Emotional Learning (SEL)" mean to you?
8. How important do you feel it is for your child's school to teach social and emotional skills, and are there specific aspects of SEL that you find particularly important or concerning? Please explain.
9. What do you believe your child should learn about gender and sexuality in school?
10. How do you feel about including topics of gender and sexuality in the school curriculum?
11. What age do you think is most appropriate to begin discussing topics of gender and sexuality in schools? Why?
12. What does the term "Critical Race Theory (CRT)" mean to you, and what are your thoughts on CRT in schools?
13. What are your thoughts on your child learning about the history of slavery in America? Should they learn that the impacts of slavery still affect Black people today? Why or why not?
14. What is your perspective on religion in public schools?
15. What are your thoughts about teachers using religious texts as a teaching tool?

Just a few more questions. These questions ask about your political beliefs and demographics.

16. How would you describe your political orientation (e.g., liberal, conservative, moderate, other)? Please type your response.
17. Would you vote with your political party regardless of candidate?
    a. Yes / No
18. How important is your religious faith compared to your political orientation?
    a. Not Important, Somewhat Important, Important, Very Important

19. How important are immigration policies to you?
    a. Not Important, Somewhat Important, Important, Very Important
20. Do you believe corporations in the United States have too much or too little influence on the government?
    a. Too much influence, About the right amount of influence, Too little influence
21. What is your age? Please type your response.
22. How do you identify your gender? Please type your response.
23. How would you describe your ethnicity or race? Please type your response.
24. What is your current marital status? Please type your response.
25. What is the highest level of education you have completed? Please type your response.
26. What is your current occupation? Please type your response.
27. How would you describe your current place of residence?
    a. Urban, Suburban, Rural
28. How many children do you have and what grade levels (pre-kindergarten, elementary, middle school, or High school)? Please type your response.
29. What is your combined household income?
    a. Less than 50,000, Between 50,000 and 100,000, Greater than 100,000

Appendix C: Oklahoma Education Polling Questions

Q1. What overall grade would you give the public schools in your community? (A, B, C, D, F)
Q2. What grade would you give the State in managing Oklahoma's K-12 education system? (A, B, C, D, F)
Q3. Do you think that government funding for public schools should increase, decrease, or stay about the same? (Greatly increase, Increase, Stay about the same, Decrease, Greatly decrease)
Q4. Do you think that public school teachers' salaries should increase, decrease, or stay about the same? (Greatly increase, Increase, Stay about the same, Decrease, Greatly decrease)
Q5. Do you support or oppose allowing charter schools in Oklahoma? (Strongly support, Somewhat support, Somewhat oppose, Strongly oppose, Neither support nor oppose)
Q6. Do you support or oppose allowing religious charter schools in Oklahoma? (Strongly support, Somewhat support, Somewhat oppose, Strongly oppose, Neither support nor oppose)
Q7. Do you support or oppose allowing families to get a tax refund for their children's private school tuition? (Strongly support, Somewhat support, Somewhat oppose, Strongly oppose, Neither support nor oppose)
Q8. Do you support or oppose combining two small neighboring districts into one larger school district? (Strongly support, Somewhat support, Somewhat oppose, Strongly oppose, Neither support nor oppose)
Q9. Do you support or oppose banning students from using their cell phones while in class? (Strongly support, Somewhat support, Somewhat oppose, Strongly oppose, Neither support nor oppose)
Q10. Do you support or oppose the law requiring students to use restrooms that match the sex listed on their birth certificate? (Strongly support, Somewhat support, Somewhat oppose, Strongly oppose, Neither support nor oppose)
Q11. Are you the parent/guardian of a child who lives in your household and attends school in Oklahoma (K-12)? (Yes, No)
Q12. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a... (Republican, Democrat, Independent, No preference)
Q13. What is your sex? (Male, Female, Prefer not to say)
Q15. What is your race/ethnicity? Check all that apply. (Asian / Pacific Islander, Black / African, Hispanic, Native / Indigenous, White / Caucasian)
Q16. What is your highest level of education? (High school degree or less, Some college/university, Four-year college/university degree, Graduate degree)
Q17. What is your age? (18-29, 30-44, 45-59, 60+)
Q18. Were you born in the United States? (Yes, No)
Q19. Write the name of the town/city in Oklahoma where you live (e.g., Tulsa).

Appendix D: A priori and Emergent Codes and Categories

1. Social Identity Theory & Social Categorization
   - Emergent Themes:
     - Developing social skills and peer interactions (e.g., understanding social cues, communicating with diverse peers)
     - Understanding and managing emotions (e.g., self-awareness, emotional intelligence)
     - Teaching slavery to promote awareness and racial acceptance
     - Using religious texts to teach about multiple worldviews
   - A Priori Codes:
     - Social identity
     - Out-groups/In-groups
     - Prejudice, bias, discrimination
     - Race, gender, nationality, or religion
     - Social environment
     - Social comparison

2. Parent/Guardian Perceptions
   - Emergent Themes:
     - Assisting with homework/accountability
     - Advocating for their child
     - Active involvement in education experience
     - Supporting/communicating with teachers and schools
     - Feeling informed due to professional involvement
     - Getting information from school emails, leadership, or external sources
     - Feeling out of the loop or uninformed
   - A Priori Codes:
     - Role of parent/guardian
     - School perception
     - Decline in confidence in schools/principals/teachers
     - Government influence (federal, state, local)
     - Partisan shifts
     - Community preferences

3. Political and Policy Issues in Education
   - Emergent Themes:
     - Teaching slavery as an essential part of American history
     - Understanding the ongoing impact of slavery
     - Concerns about religious texts promoting specific beliefs
     - Using religious texts as optional/elective courses or historical documents
   - A Priori Codes:
     - Curriculum preferences
     - Topic preferences
     - Religion in schools (prayer, religious texts)
     - Critical Race Theory

    - Partisan split
    - Political divide
    - Policy issues

4. Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) and Identity Development
- Emergent Themes:
    - Understanding and managing emotions
    - Learning to regulate emotions
    - Building self-awareness and emotional intelligence
- A Priori Codes:
    - Self-concept, self-worth, self-esteem
    - Social categorization
    - Norms, values, and behaviors
    - Social-emotional learning

Appendix E: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval Letter



Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: July 30, 2024 **IRB#:** 17510

Principal Investigator: Graydon Morris

Approval Date: 07/30/2024

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: How do parents of different political orientations perceive currently debated educational terms and issues? An in-depth qualitative analysis

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board