

January 2026

SCHOOL CHOICE

From Exception to Expectation

Survey of U.S. Parents of School-Aged Children



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A record number of American parents are engaging in school choice, reflecting a shift from choice as an exception to choice as an expectation. In a national survey of U.S. parents of school-aged children, nearly three-quarters (75%) said they considered, searched for, or enrolled at least one of their children in a new or different school within the past year—the highest level recorded in five years.

■ **Twenty-one percent** of all U.S. parents—or approximately 13.3 million moms and dads—**enrolled** at least one child in a new school last year. While dissatisfaction with a child's current school was the single most cited reason for searching (32%), most parents cited practical, predictable life transitions as their primary motivation.

■ Parents who enrolled a child in a new school prioritized **safety (61%), a supportive social environment (47%) and strong academics (36%)**, underscoring that school choice decisions are driven primarily by practical concerns about student well-being and learning.

■ Enrollment patterns point to a more **diverse education landscape**. Parents who switched schools were more likely to choose alternative options such as private schools, homeschooling, full-time online schools, and microschools. At the same time, majorities of parents continue to report having children enrolled in public education.

■ Despite record levels of interest, **barriers remain significant**. Thirty-one percent of all U.S. parents searched for a new school but did not enroll, citing concerns about disruption, uncertainty about making the right choice, transportation challenges, and limited availability.

■ Looking ahead, demand shows **no signs of slowing**. Sixty-two percent of parents say they are likely to search for a new school in 2026. As school choice becomes a standard part of family decision-making, parents say they want clearer, more practical information to help turn interest into action.

INTRODUCTION

Twenty-five years ago, the idea that parents would actively choose a learning environment for their children outside of an assigned school was the exception rather than the rule. While early forms of school choice—such as district open enrollment, public charter schools, and the first private school choice programs—were emerging, access was limited and participation remained far from widespread.

Over the past three decades, however, the school choice movement has been steadily working toward a more pluralistic education landscape—one in which

families have the power and freedom to determine how and where their children learn.

While the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated policy change and heightened parent demand, the transformation of school choice from an exception to an expectation did not happen overnight.

Younger parents, in particular, have grown up in communities where educational options were already expanding—or they watched their own parents actively choose schools. At the same time, they experienced choice becoming the norm across nearly every aspect of daily life, from transportation and entertainment to work, shopping, and communication. Against this broader cultural backdrop, the expectation that **families should be able to choose what works best for them** has increasingly extended to education.

That shift is reflected clearly in our January 2026 survey of 3,960 U.S. parents of school-aged children and in this report, **School Choice: From Exception to Expectation.**

To view this report online, download graphics, or schedule a conversation with a team member at the National School Choice Awareness Foundation, visit schoolchoiceweek.com/national-survey/.



WHO IS SEARCHING FOR SCHOOLS

School searching is now a common experience for American families. **Nearly three-quarters of U.S. parents of school-aged children (75%) said they considered, searched for, or enrolled at least one of their children in a new or different school within the last year.** Throughout this report, we refer to these parents as “school searchers,” while recognizing that this group is comprised of families whose activities and outcomes varied:

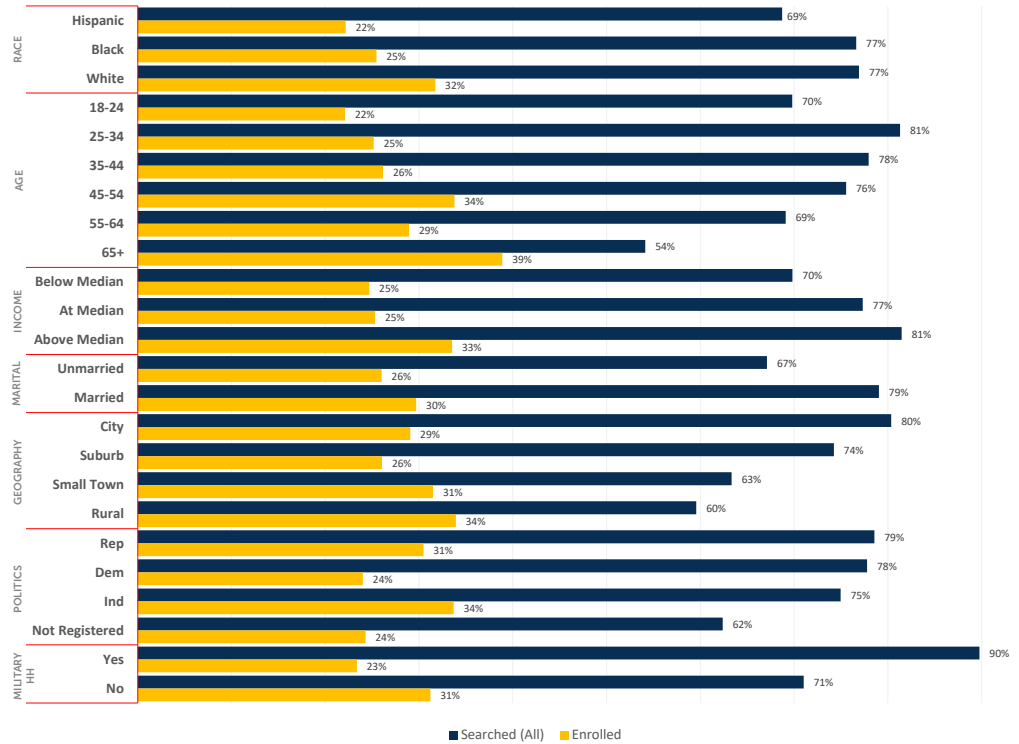
Parents who considered finding a new school but did not actively search	23%	14.5 million
Parents who actively searched for a new school but did not enroll their child anywhere new	31%	19.6 million
Parents who actively searched for new schools and enrolled at least one child in a new school	21%	13.3 million

While school searching was widespread across the country, enrollment rates varied across key groups. Parents with above-median household incomes were more likely to enroll a child in a new school than parents at or below the median. Younger parents were more likely to consider or search for new schools, while older parents were more likely to enroll.

Geographic differences also emerged. Parents living in cities were more likely to consider or search for new schools, while enrollment rates were higher among parents in small towns and rural communities.



School Search and Enrollment by Demographic Group



WHY PARENTS SEARCH FOR SCHOOLS

Most parents who search for or enroll their children in new schools do so for **practical, predictable reasons** tied to family life. While dissatisfaction with a child's current school or a desire for a better fit was the single most commonly cited reason, it accounted for roughly one-third of parents, not a majority.

For most families, school choice is exercised during **routine moments of transition**. More than half of parents who searched for or enrolled in a new school cited commonplace reasons such as moving between school levels, enrolling a child for the first time, or relocating to a new community.

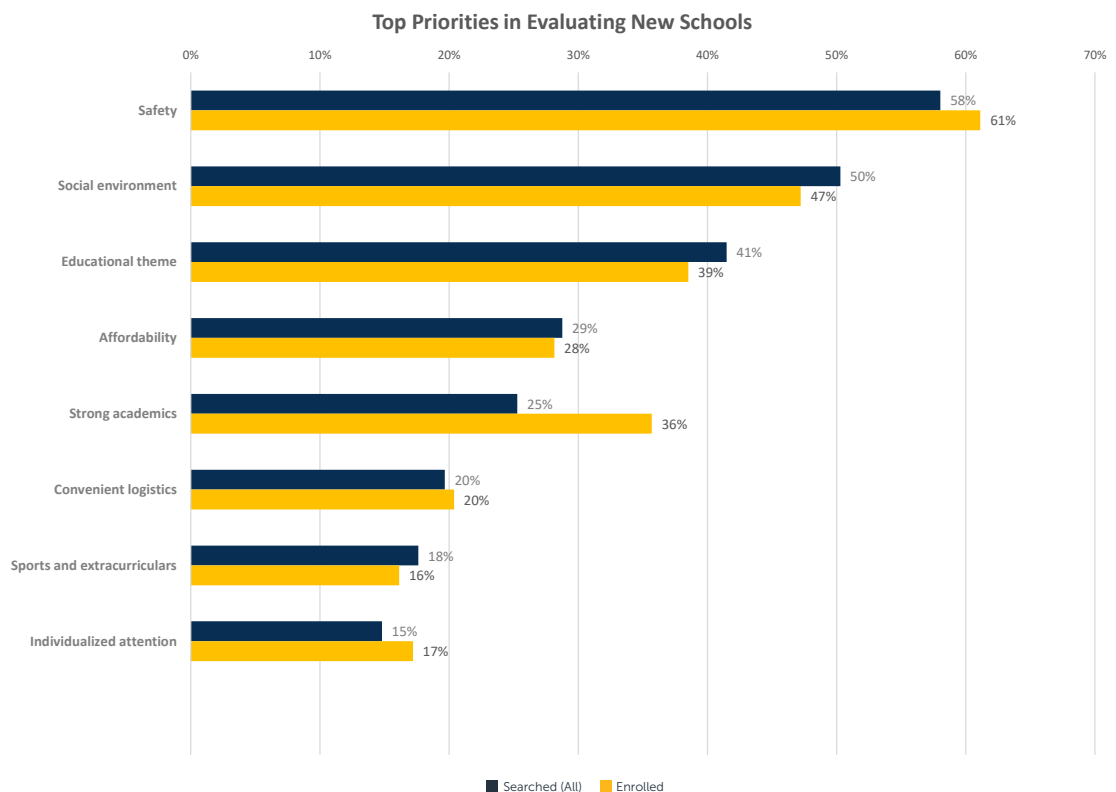
Primary Search Reason	Searched (All)	Enrolled
Dissatisfaction / Fit	32%	32%
Matriculation	26%	26%
Child First Entering School	22%	20%
Move / Relocation	14%	16%
Other	7%	6%

WHAT PARENTS LOOK FOR IN NEW SCHOOLS

Parents who searched for new schools and parents who ultimately enrolled their children in new schools prioritized many of the same factors when evaluating options. Across both groups, **safety ranked highest**, with a majority citing the importance of a safe, supportive environment.

Social factors also mattered. Nearly half of parents prioritized a positive social environment, including friendships and a sense of belonging, while many looked for schools with a specific educational theme or approach, such as STEM, arts, or faith-based education.

Academic quality and affordability were important considerations as well. Parents who enrolled a child in a new school were more likely than parents who searched overall to prioritize strong academics and high-quality teaching, while affordability ranked similarly across both groups.



HOW PARENTS SEARCHED FOR SCHOOLS

Parents who enrolled a child in a new school used a combination of in-person engagement and online research to evaluate their options. **Visiting schools in person** was the most common approach among parents who enrolled (43%), followed closely by visiting school websites (41%) and conducting general online searches (37%).

Parents also relied on **conversations** as part of the search process. More than one-third of parents who enrolled a child spoke with teachers, counselors, or school administrators, and a similar share consulted other parents, family members, or friends.

Compared with parents who actively searched for new schools but did not enroll their child anywhere new, parents who ultimately enrolled were more likely to **engage directly with schools**—through visits, conversations with staff, and participation in open houses or tours.



Search Activity	Searched Did Not Enroll	Enrolled
Visited schools in person	23%	43%
Visited school websites	36%	41%
Conducted general online searches	32%	37%
Spoke with teachers, counselors, or school staff	21%	36%
Talked with friends or relatives	28%	36%
Asked other parents or families	29%	35%
Looked at online school-rating sites	29%	31%
Reviewed school materials	24%	31%
Attended open houses or school tours	21%	31%
Checked social media groups or forums	17%	24%
Used a school-search tool or school-finder website	20%	21%
Watched videos or virtual tours	16%	20%
Consulted child's current teacher(s)	15%	19%
Participated in a school fair or school-choice event	15%	16%

WHAT TYPES OF SCHOOLS DO PARENTS ULTIMATELY SELECT

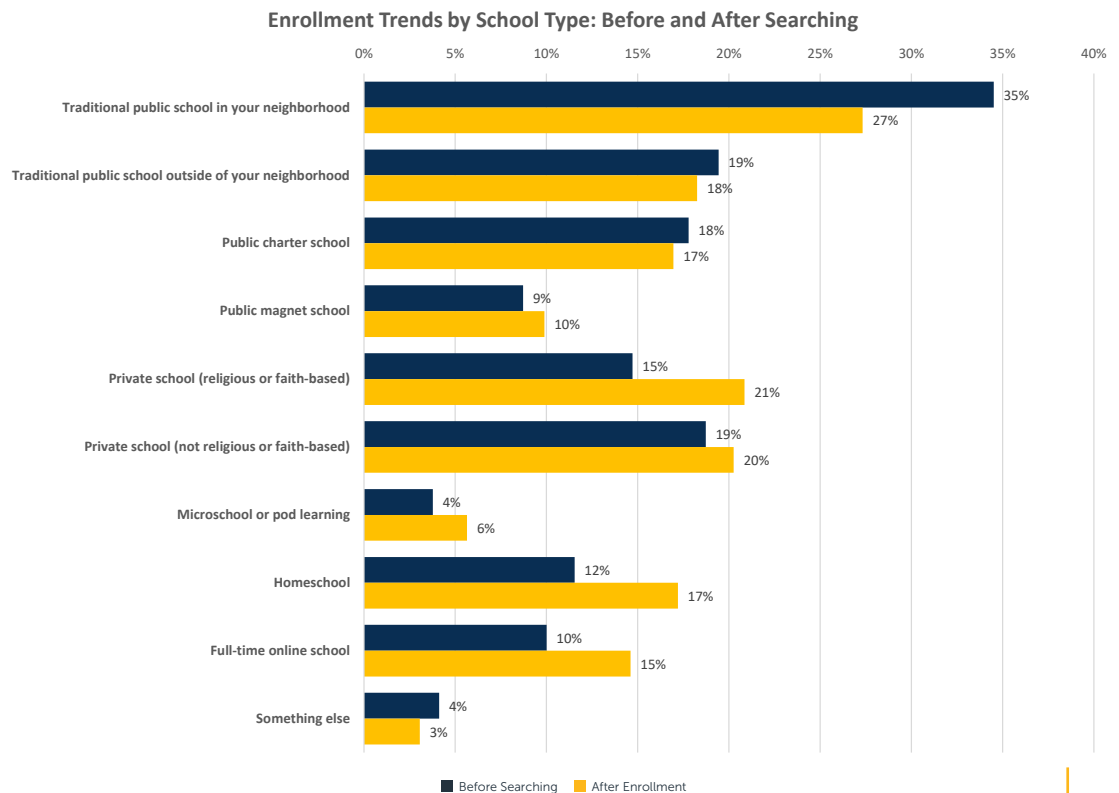
The enrollment patterns observed in this survey reflect a broader shift toward a more diverse K–12 education landscape. As school choice policies have expanded over time, families today have access to a wider range of learning options, and enrollment patterns increasingly reflect that diversity.

After enrolling a child in a new school, parents were less likely to choose traditional neighborhood public schools and more likely to select alternative options. **Enrollment in neighborhood public schools declined** from 35% before searching to 27% after enrollment.

At the same time, **enrollment increased across several nontraditional models**. Private religious schools rose from 15% to 21%, homeschooling increased from 12% to 17%, and enrollment in full-time online schools grew from 10% to 15%. Microschools and pod learning also expanded modestly, rising from 4% to 6%.

These shifts align with long-term changes in education policy and supply. The growth of charter schools, private education options, microschoools, homeschooling, and full-time online schools has created a more pluralistic system in which families can choose among multiple pathways.

Changes among other public school options, including charter, magnet, and public schools outside a family's neighborhood, were comparatively small.



WHEN SEARCHING DOES NOT LEAD TO ENROLLMENT

One of the most prominent findings in our survey is the **gap between interest and enrollment**. While three-quarters of U.S. parents considered or searched for a new school in the past year, only about two in ten ultimately enrolled a child in a new school. That means a large share of parents—roughly four in ten—actively searched for new options but did not follow through with enrollment.

These parents reported facing a range of barriers that made switching schools difficult, even after investing time and effort in the process.

Concerns about disruption were the most commonly cited challenge.

One-third of parents who searched but did not enroll said they worried about disrupting their child’s academic or social life, and 26% said they were concerned about making the wrong choice. Availability also mattered: 26% reported a lack of good options nearby, and another 26% said their preferred schools were full or waitlisted.

Logistical barriers were also prominent. **One-quarter of parents cited transportation difficulties**, and nearly one in five said the process itself was too complicated. While affordability remains a concern for some families, fewer parents cited cost than transportation or uncertainty—reflecting a shift from earlier assumptions that finances were the primary obstacle to school choice.

These findings suggest that as school choice options and affordability programs have expanded, the remaining barriers are increasingly about confidence, comfort, and logistics. Helping families navigate the process, understand their options, and access transportation may now play a larger role in turning interest into enrollment than cost alone.

Barrier	Searched Did Not Enroll
Worried about disrupting child's academics / social life	33%
No seats available in preferred schools	26%
Concerned about making the wrong choice	26%
Lack of options	26%
Transportation would have been too difficult	25%
Could not afford options	22%
Decided child's current school was best fit	20%
Process was too complicated	19%
Did not know where to get information	16%
Ran out of time to make change	15%
Social media	20%

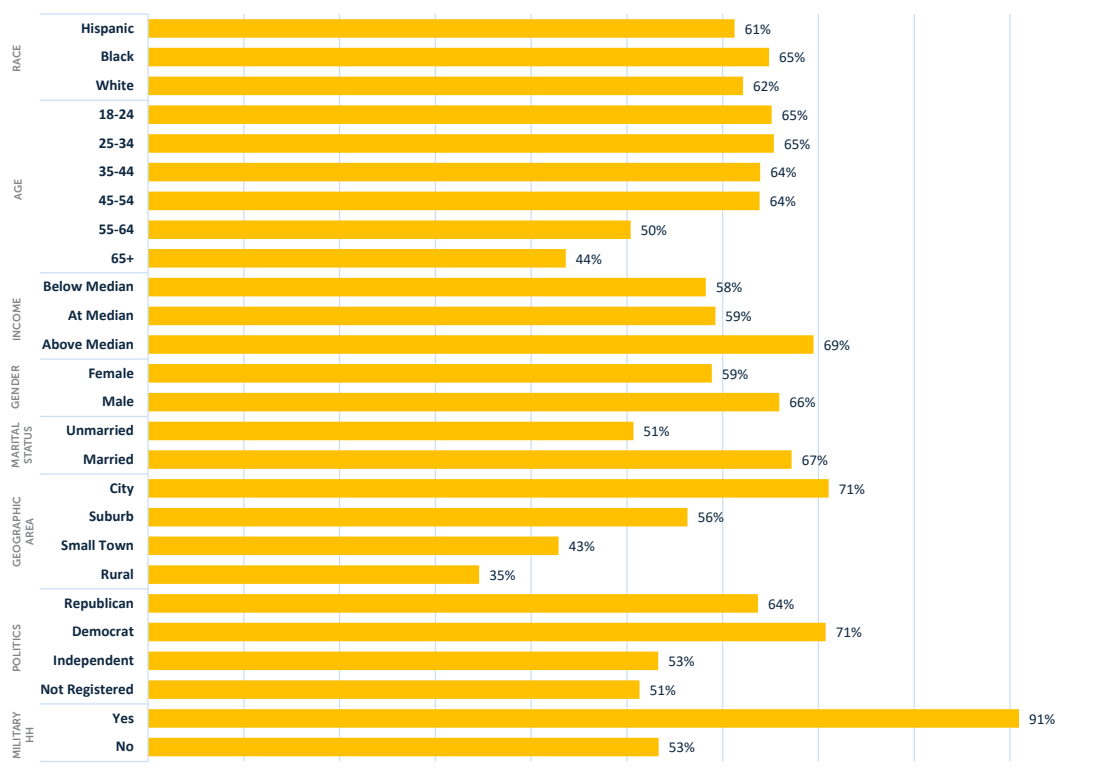
LOOKING AHEAD: SCHOOL SEARCHING IN 2026

School searching shows no signs of slowing. Nationally, **62% of U.S. parents of school-aged children say they are likely to search for a new school for at least one of their children in 2026**, indicating that high levels of engagement with education options are expected to continue into the year ahead.

Planned searching is most common among parents ages 25–44, parents with above-median household incomes, and parents living in cities. At the same time, interest in searching remains widespread across racial and political groups, with similar shares of Hispanic, Black, and White parents saying they are likely to explore new school options.

Likelihood of searching is elevated among both Democratic and Republican parents, underscoring the broad-based nature of demand. Military-connected families stand out in particular, with more than nine in ten reporting that they are likely to search for a new school in the coming year.

Parents Likely to Search for New Schools in 2026



EMPOWERING PARENTS WITH HELPFUL INFORMATION

As school searching becomes more common and more parents expect to actively choose schools, **access to clear, practical information becomes increasingly important**. Parents say that finding options is only part of the process; having the right resources to understand, compare, and act on those options is essential to making confident decisions.

The most frequently cited information need was **guidance on government programs or funding that can help families afford private schools or homeschooling**. More than four in ten parents (42%) said they want clearer information about available financial support. Parents also expressed strong interest in learning about new or alternative education options in their area (40%), reflecting the growing diversity of schooling models available to families.

% of Parents	Want Information About
42%	Government programs that help families afford private schools
40%	New, nontraditional, and alternative education options in their area
37%	Free or low-cost transportation options
34%	Help in determining whether a school is a good fit
25%	Finding different schools and education programs
22%	Specialized schools (STEM, career and technical, arts)
17%	Legal rights as a parent
16%	Open houses and school choice events
10%	The process to enroll child in schools and education programs

ABOUT US

The [National School Choice Awareness Foundation](#) (NSCAF) and the National School Choice Resource Center are 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations dedicated to helping families understand, explore, and navigate K–12 school choice options. Our work focuses on providing parents with clear, trustworthy information and practical tools that support informed decision-making at every stage of the school search process.

WHAT WE'RE DOING TO HELP FAMILIES

Raising awareness nationwide

Each January, [National School Choice Week](#) brings school options into the national spotlight through events and activities across the country. In January 2026, organizations, and community groups are hosting more than 28,000 school fairs, open houses, information sessions, and other events designed to help parents learn about the full range of K–12 options available to them.

Turning awareness into empowerment

Through [Navigate School Choice](#) and [Conoce tus Opciones Escolares](#), parents can access the nation's most comprehensive free school search resources in English and Spanish, organized state by state. These tools help families compare options, understand enrollment processes, and make informed decisions based on their children's needs.

Strengthening the ecosystem that supports families

The [Navigate School Choice Network](#) connects organizations working directly with parents to share tools, data, and best practices that improve local outreach and navigation. NSCAF also convenes partners through its annual summit and supports family-facing work through targeted grants.

methodology

This report is based on a nationally representative survey of 3,960 U.S. parents of school-aged children ages 4–18, conducted by the National School Choice Awareness Foundation from December 2–10, 2025, using SurveyMonkey's national audience panel. Results were weighted to reflect the national population of parents by key demographic characteristics, including age, race and ethnicity, household income, geographic region, and urbanicity. The margin of error for the full sample is ± 1.6 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.