

# Americans' Views of How the News Media Covers Teachers

Findings from a Public Agenda National Survey





## Executive Summary

This report focuses on how Americans and K-12 public school teachers in particular view news media coverage of teachers and how they view the teaching profession overall. Findings from this nationally representative survey of American adults and of K-12 public teachers, fielded in November 2020, include the following:

1. While nearly all Americans believe that teachers are skilled professionals who deserve respect, with many seeing them as heroes, few teachers think their communities value them a great deal.
2. Only about half of Americans think that teachers should be paid as much as doctors or lawyers, and about half think that teachers who do not like their jobs should quit rather than complain.
3. Americans believe that the news media impacts teachers and teaching, including how much communities value teachers. Most Americans, including most teachers, want the news media to cover teachers more positively.
4. Americans are especially interested in reading news stories about curriculum and pedagogy, but most also believe it is very important for the media to report on accusations of illegal activity by teachers. Teachers, however, are most interested in reading about whether teachers have sufficient supplies and how issues like student poverty affect teaching and learning.

# Findings in Detail

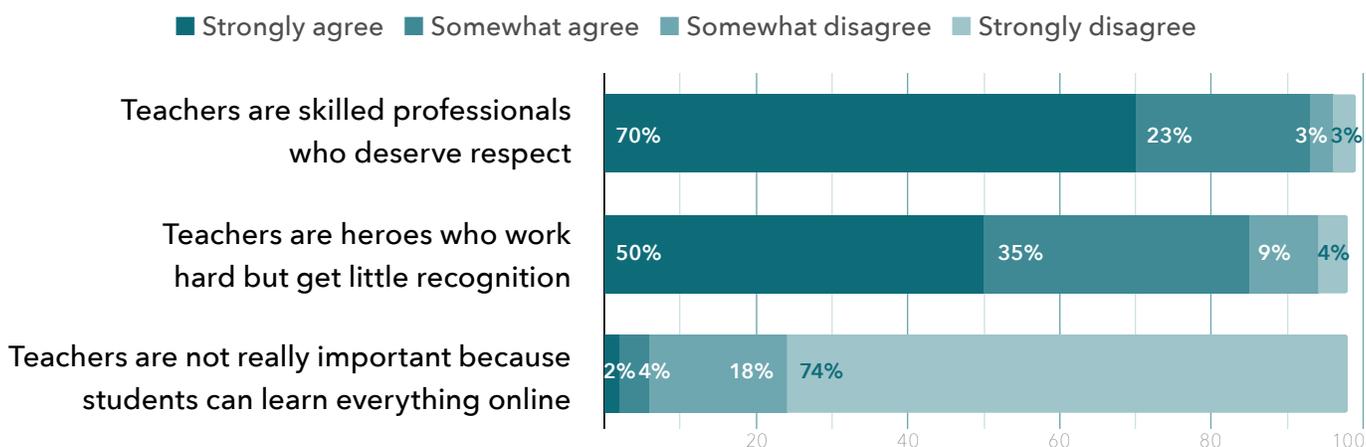
## FINDING 1. While nearly all Americans believe that teachers are skilled professionals who deserve respect, with many seeing them as heroes, few teachers think their communities value them a great deal.

Nearly all Americans (93 percent) agree that teachers are skilled professionals who deserve respect.<sup>1</sup> In fact, 56 percent of Americans say that they would like to have their child take up teaching in the public schools as a career, up from only 46 percent of Americans who said so in a 2018 PDK International survey.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, 85 percent of Americans strongly or somewhat agree that teachers are heroes who work hard but get little recognition; see figure 1. Hardly any Americans believe that teachers are unimportant because students can learn everything online.

### Nearly all Americans believe that teachers are skilled professionals who deserve respect, and many see them as heroes.

**Figure 1.** Percent of Americans who agree or disagree with each of the following statements about K-12 public school teachers:



Base: All Americans, N=3,130.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding and the less than 5 percent of respondents who answered "Don't know."

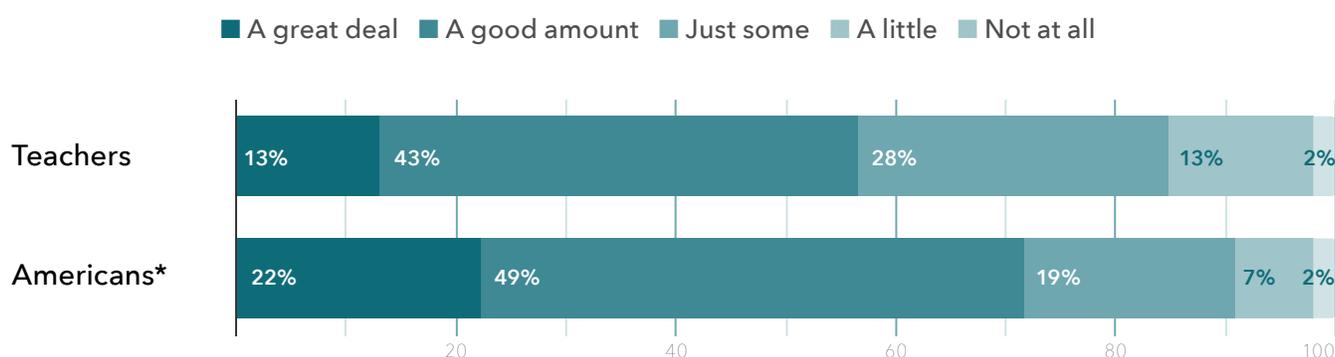
<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, findings about Americans overall are weighted to the general population and therefore include responses from teachers in ways that are weighted to represent the proportion of teachers in the American population.

<sup>2</sup> PDK International, "Teaching: Respect but dwindling appeal" (Arlington, VA: PDK International, 2018), [https://pdkpoll.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/pdkpoll50\\_2018.pdf](https://pdkpoll.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/pdkpoll50_2018.pdf).

But only 13 percent of teachers think their community values them a great deal—although 43 percent think their communities value them a good amount. Compared to teachers, a slightly greater proportion of Americans think their communities value teachers a great deal or a good amount; see figure 2.

### Few teachers think their communities value them a great deal.

**Figure 2.** Percent of K-12 public school teachers who indicate how much they feel their community values them as a teacher and percent of Americans\* who indicate how much they feel their community values teachers:



Base: Americans, N=2,428; Teachers, n=702.

\*For this question only, Americans' responses do not include teachers.

Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding.

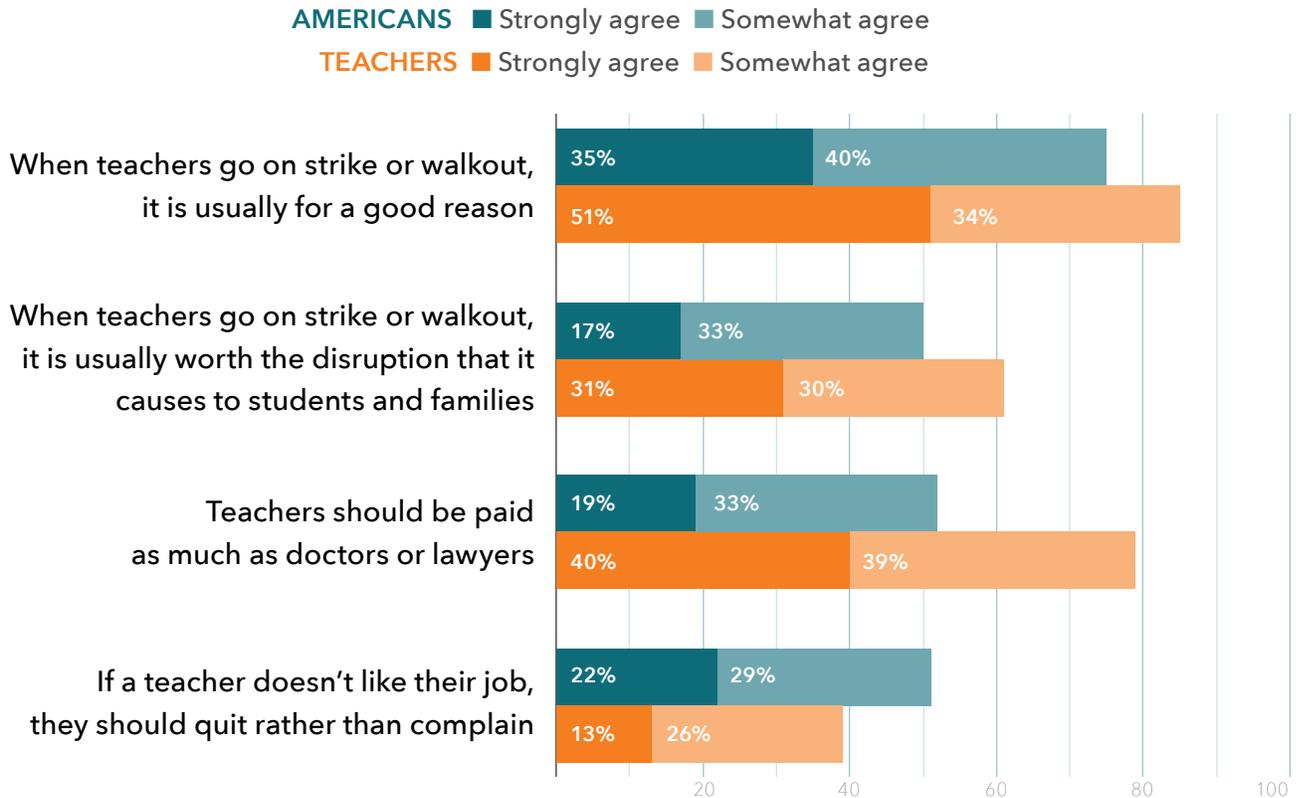
### FINDING 2. Only about half of Americans think that teachers should be paid as much as doctors or lawyers, and about half think that teachers who do not like their jobs should quit rather than complain.

While most Americans see teachers as either heroes or skilled professionals, only about half of Americans believe that teachers should be paid as much as doctors or lawyers. Compared to Americans overall, far more teachers, nearly 80 percent, think they should be paid as much as doctors or lawyers; see figure 3.

Most Americans believe that if teachers strike, it is usually for a good reason. Half of Americans believe strikes are worth the disruption that it causes to students and families. But about half of Americans also believe that if a teacher does not like their job, they should quit rather than complain; see figure 3.

**Half of Americans think that teachers should be paid as much as doctors or lawyers. But half also think that teachers who do not like their jobs should quit rather than complain.**

**Figure 3.** Percent of Americans and percent of K-12 public school teachers who agree with each of the following statements about K-12 public school teachers:



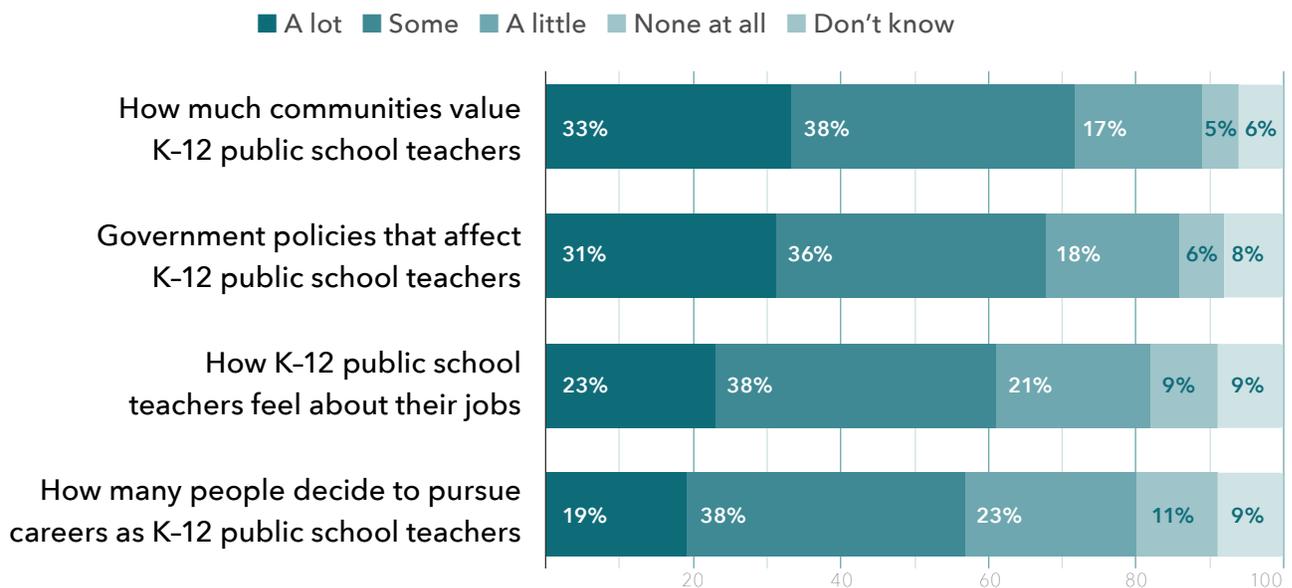
Base: Americans, N=3,130; Teachers, n=702

**FINDING 3. Americans believe that the news media impacts teachers and teaching, including how much communities value teachers. Most Americans, including most teachers, want the news media to cover teachers more positively.**

Only 20 percent of Americans say they pay extremely or very close attention to stories about K-12 education in the news media. Not surprisingly, more teachers (52 percent) say they pay extremely or very close attention to stories about education in the news. Yet most Americans, including a similar percentage of teachers, believe that the news media has some or a lot of impact on how much communities value K-12 public school teachers, on how those teachers feel about their jobs, on how many people decide to pursue careers as K-12 teachers, and on government policies that affect K-12 teachers; see figure 4.

**Americans believe that the news media impacts how much communities value teachers, teachers’ feelings about their jobs, government policies affecting teachers, and how many people pursue teaching careers.**

**Figure 4.** Percent of Americans who say how much impact they think the news media has on each of the following:



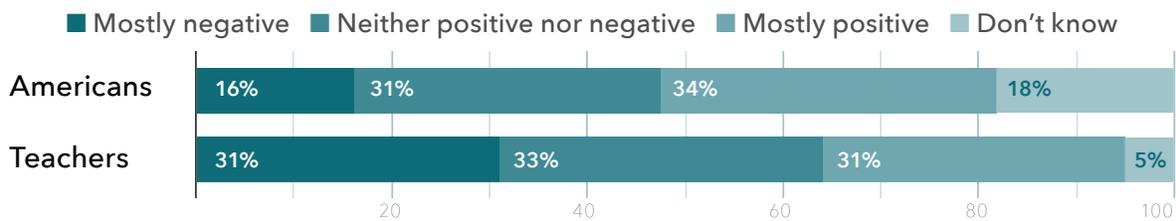
Base: Americans, N=3,130.  
Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding.

When it comes to how the media portrays them, about one-third of teachers say that most of the stories they see in the news about K-12 public school teachers are mostly negative, about one-third say they are mostly positive, and about one-third say they are neither positive nor negative. Fewer Americans overall than teachers think that the stories they see in the media about teachers are negative; see figure 5.

Seventy-one percent of Americans and a similar percentage of teachers say they would like the news media to cover more good things that K-12 public school teachers are doing. However, 23 percent of Americans and only 14 percent of teachers say it would not matter to them if the news media covered more good things that teachers are doing.

**More teachers than Americans overall say that the news media portrays K-12 public school teachers negatively.**

**Figure 5.** Percent of Americans and percent of K-12 public school teachers who say that most of the stories about K-12 public school teachers that they see in the news media are mostly negative, neither positive nor negative, mostly positive, or that they do not know:



Base: Americans, N=3,130; Teachers, n=702.  
 Numbers may not add up to 100 percent owing to rounding.

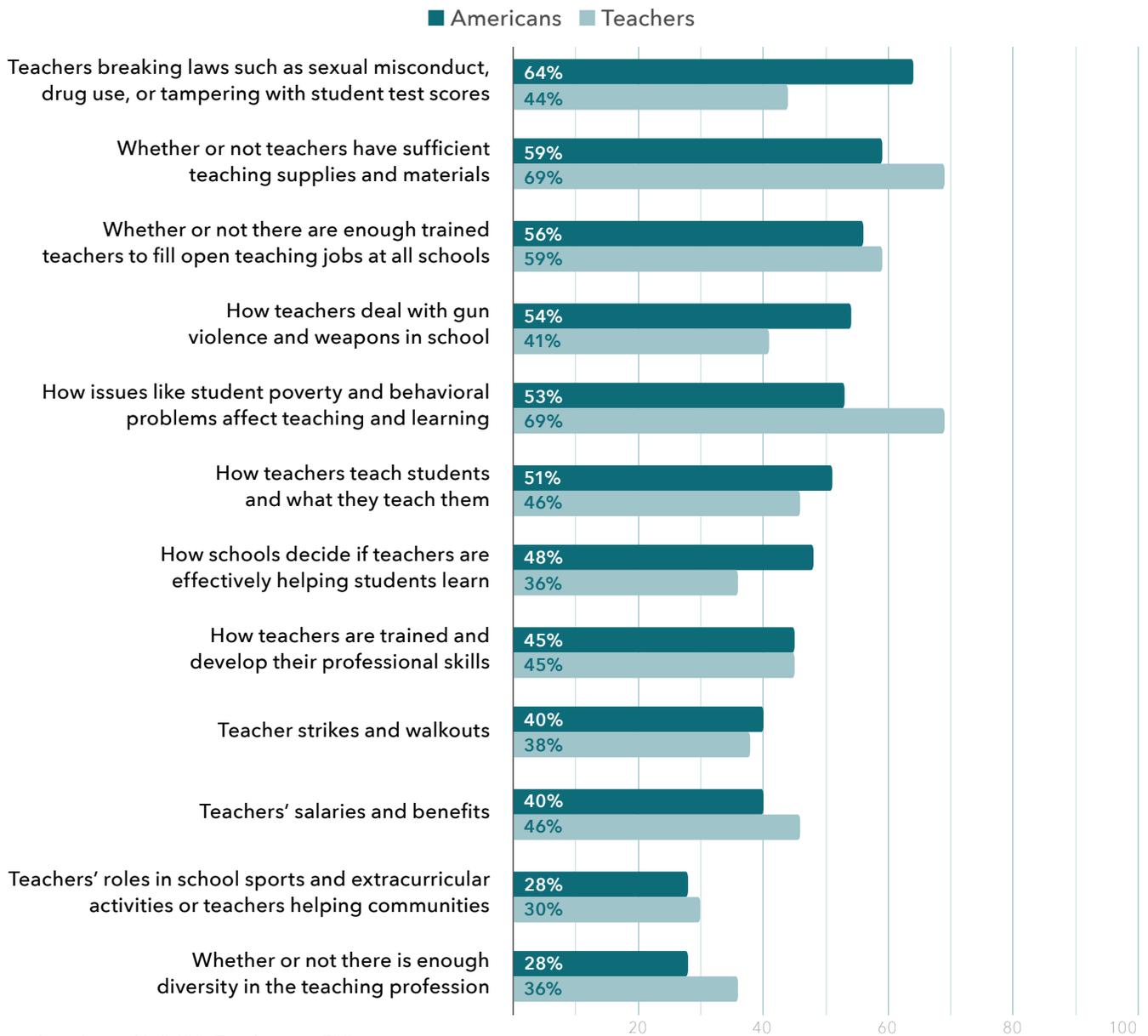
**FINDING 4. Americans are especially interested in reading news stories about curriculum and pedagogy, but most also believe it is very important for the media to report on accusations of illegal activity by teachers. Teachers, however, are most interested in reading about whether teachers have sufficient supplies and how issues like student poverty affect teaching and learning.**

About two-thirds of Americans believe it is very important for the news media to report on teachers breaking laws, including sexual misconduct, drug use, or tampering with student test scores, making this the topic that the greatest number of Americans believe is very important for news media to cover.

However, fewer teachers than Americans overall think it is very important for the news media to report on teachers breaking laws. More teachers think it is very important for news media to report on whether teachers have sufficient supplies and how issues like student poverty affect teaching and learning; see figure 6.

**More teachers than Americans overall think it is important for the news media to cover student poverty and behavioral problems and the lack of teaching supplies.**

**Figure 6.** Percent of K-12 public school teachers and percent of Americans who say it is very important for the news media to cover each of the following topics about K-12 public school teachers:



Base: Americans, N=3,130; Teachers, n=702

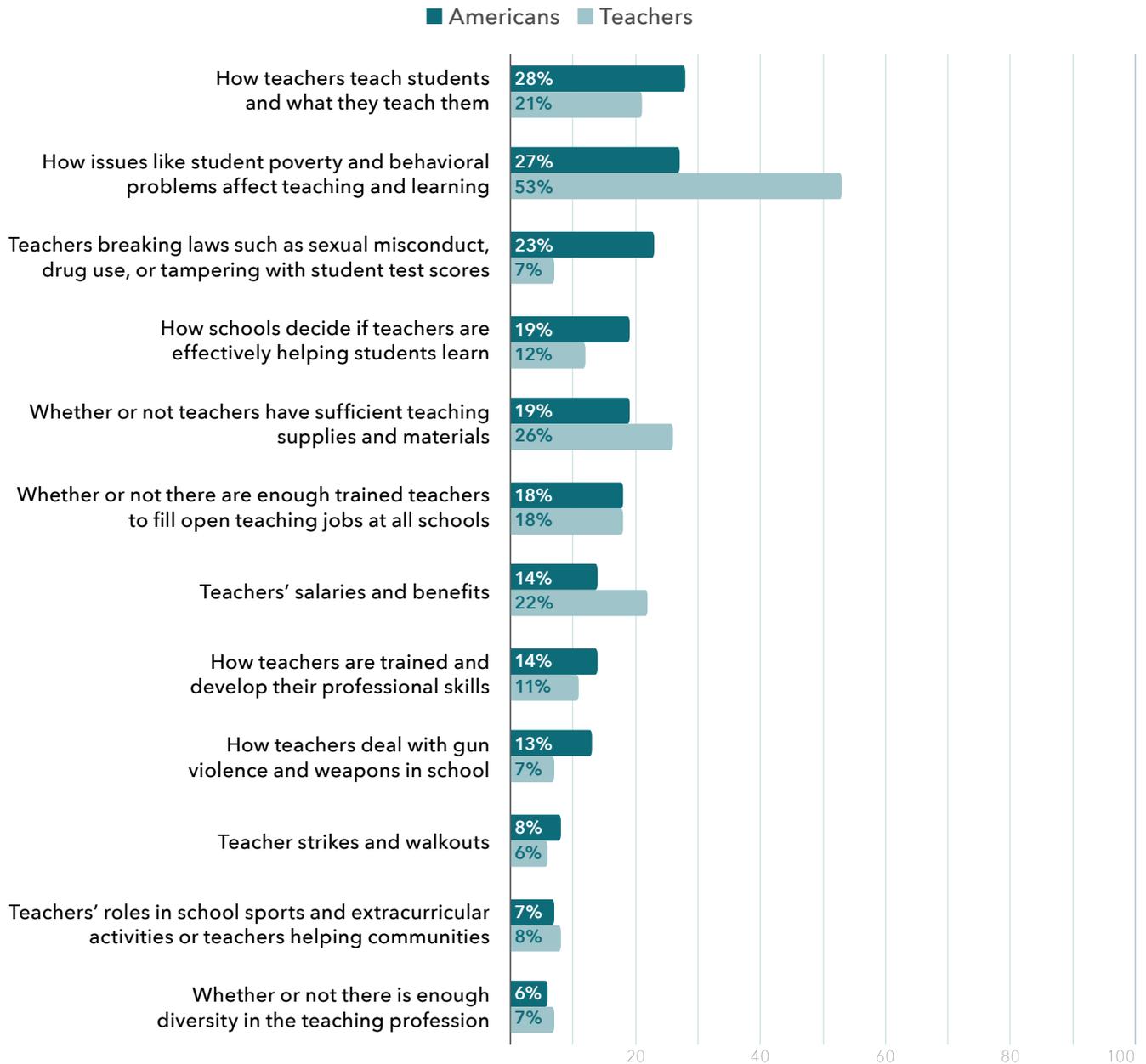
However, what Americans believe is most important for news media to report is not necessarily what they believe is the most interesting to read. Teachers breaking laws – the topic that the largest share of Americans say is very important for the news media to report on – is only the third most often cited topic that Americans say they would personally be interested in reading about. The most often cited topic that Americans would be interested in reading about is how teachers teach students and what they teach them; see figure 7.

When it comes to what teachers themselves are most interested in reading about, a majority indicate they are interested in how issues like student poverty affect teaching and learning. Far more teachers than Americans overall are interested in reading about this issue; see figure 7.



**More teachers than Americans overall are interested in reading about how issues like student poverty affect teaching and learning.**

**Figure 7.** Percent of K-12 public school teachers and percent of Americans who say they are personally interested in reading about each of the following topics about K-12 public school teachers:

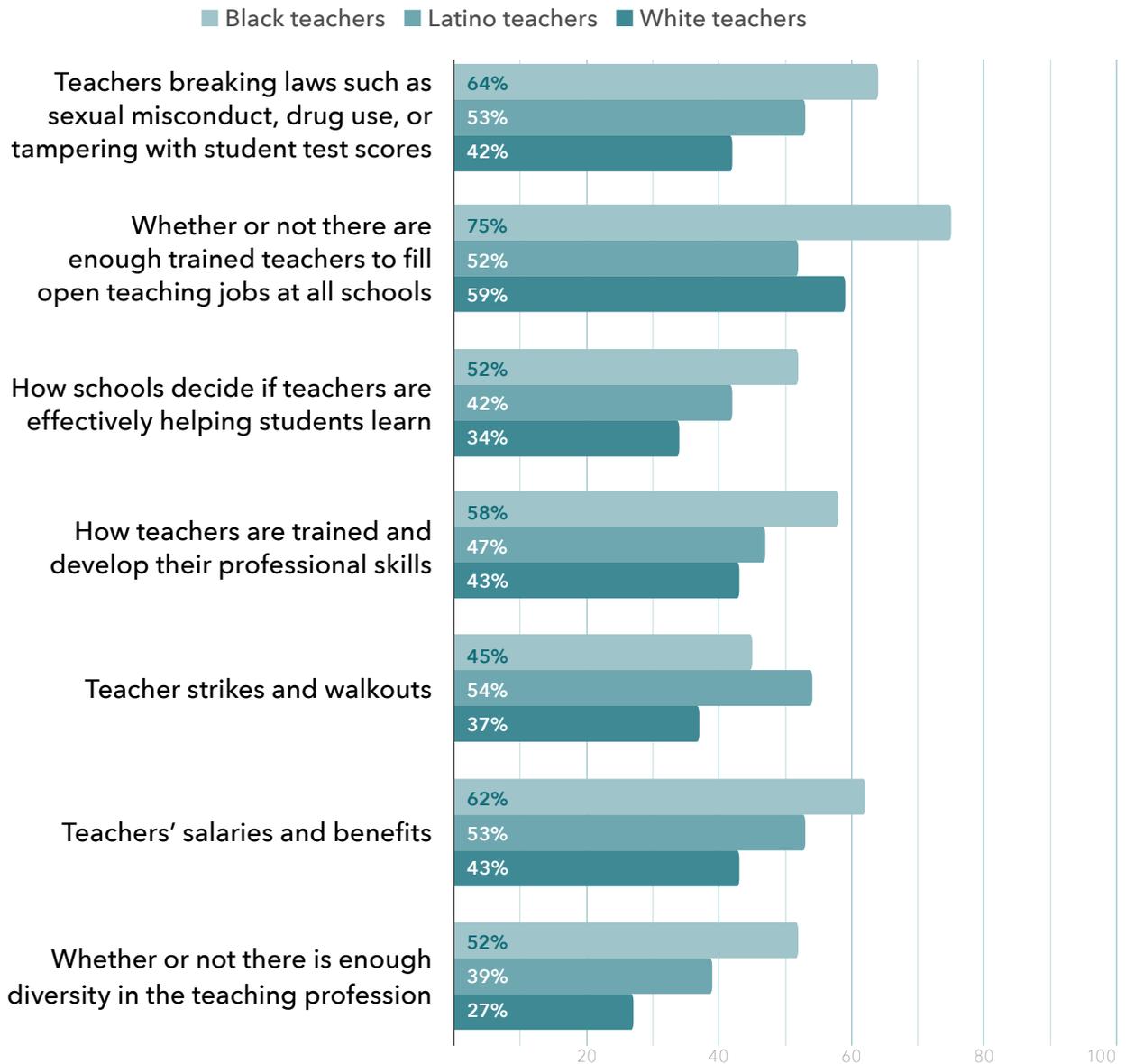


Base: Americans, N=3,130; Teachers, n=702

More Black teachers than their white or Latino counterparts think it is very important for the news media to cover topics such as diversity in the teaching profession, teacher shortages, and teacher salaries. More Latino teachers than their white or Black peers say it is very important for the media to cover strikes and walkouts; see figure 8.

**More Black teachers think it is very important for the news media to cover diversity in the teaching profession, teacher shortages, and teacher salaries.**

**Figure 8.** Percent of K-12 public school teachers who say it is very important for the news media to cover each of the following topics about K-12 public school teachers, by race:



Base: Black teachers, n=144; Hispanic teachers, n=218; white teachers, n=308



## Methodology in Brief

These are findings from a nationally representative survey of 3,130 adult Americans 18 years and older conducted by Public Agenda. The survey was fielded November 18 to December 1, 2020, in English and Spanish, by telephone and online. NORC at the University of Chicago fielded the survey. The sample includes 2,684 respondents who were randomly sampled from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak panel, of whom 256 were K-12 public school teachers, including charter school teachers. Another 446 K-12 public school teachers, including charter school teachers, were sampled from Lucid, a non-probability opt-in panel. Private school teachers were excluded from the sample. The general public sample was demographically weighted to the 2020 Current Population Survey and the teacher sample was weighted to the 2017-18 National Teacher and Principal Survey. The margin of error for the total sample is +/-2.8 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence interval. For the teachers sample, the margin of error is +/-5.8 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence interval. For parents, the margin of error is +/-5.1 with a design effect of 1.65.

For a complete methodology and for the survey topline with full question wording, please go to <https://publicagenda.org/reports/americans-views-of-how-the-news-media-covers-teachers/> or email [research@publicagenda.org](mailto:research@publicagenda.org).

# AMERICANS' VIEWS OF HOW THE NEWS MEDIA COVERS TEACHERS

Findings from a Public Agenda National Survey

A report from Public Agenda  
by Rebecca Silliman and David Schleifer

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These survey findings are part of Public Agenda's [Teachers in the News](#) project, which mobilizes critical reflection in support of more insightful coverage of K-12 education. The project also includes an analysis of newspapers' education journalism from 2009 to 2020. For more information, including implications of these findings, please go to <https://publicagenda.org/reports/americans-views-of-how-the-news-media-covers-teachers/>

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