



# Amid COVID-19 Recession, Missouri Voters Still Support Increased School Spending

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*Between June 23 and July 1, 2020, we worked with YouGov to interview 900 likely voters from the state of Missouri. In addition to questions regarding state and national political candidates, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and school satisfaction, we explored public opinion on public elementary and secondary school funding. We learned that more than six in ten surveyed Missourians support increased school spending. Nearly three in four indicated support for increases to Missouri teacher salaries, with the vast majority of respondents indicating support for achieving salary increases through additional taxation. Despite this support, many Missourians were incorrect in their estimates of average school spending and teacher salaries across the state. Responses also varied significantly by respondents' political identification, race, and level of education.*

## Introduction

In addition to a global public health crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted the second economic recession in little over a decade.<sup>1</sup> As education leaders and policymakers consider school reopening strategies, they must do so amid a tenuous school funding climate characterized by state funding cuts and an uncertain federal fiscal stimulus package.<sup>3</sup> While Missourians are not alone in confronting these challenging economic times, the state's recent school funding history suggests times ahead likely will be difficult, particularly for economically disadvantaged students. While school employees including teachers were laid off en masse across the country following the Great Recession, we are only beginning to experience the COVID-19-induced effects on education labor.<sup>4</sup> Only two years ago, high-profile teacher strikes protesting teacher salaries and school spending garnered intense media attention in five states which witnessed acute funding cuts after the Great Recession, including two of Missouri's border states in Oklahoma and Kentucky.<sup>5</sup> Amid this context, this policy brief examines public opinion regarding Missouri school funding and teacher salaries.

## School Spending

Missouri spent an average of \$11,943 per pupil in elementary and secondary schools across the state in the 2016-17 school year, the latest year of available national data (see Figure 1).<sup>6</sup> Its spending ranked 33<sup>rd</sup> in the nation and 14% lower than the national average of \$13,834. It's important to note, however, that a portion of Missouri's low spending likely is attributable to the state's low cost of living; average cost of living in the state is the sixth lowest in the country, approximately 12% lower than the national average.<sup>7</sup> Adjusted for cost of living, Missouri's spending ranked 28<sup>th</sup> nationally in 2016.<sup>8</sup> From a regional perspective, Missouri's spending is approximately in line with its neighboring states, higher than half of its bordering states (Arkansas, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Tennessee) and lower than the remaining half (Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, and Nebraska).

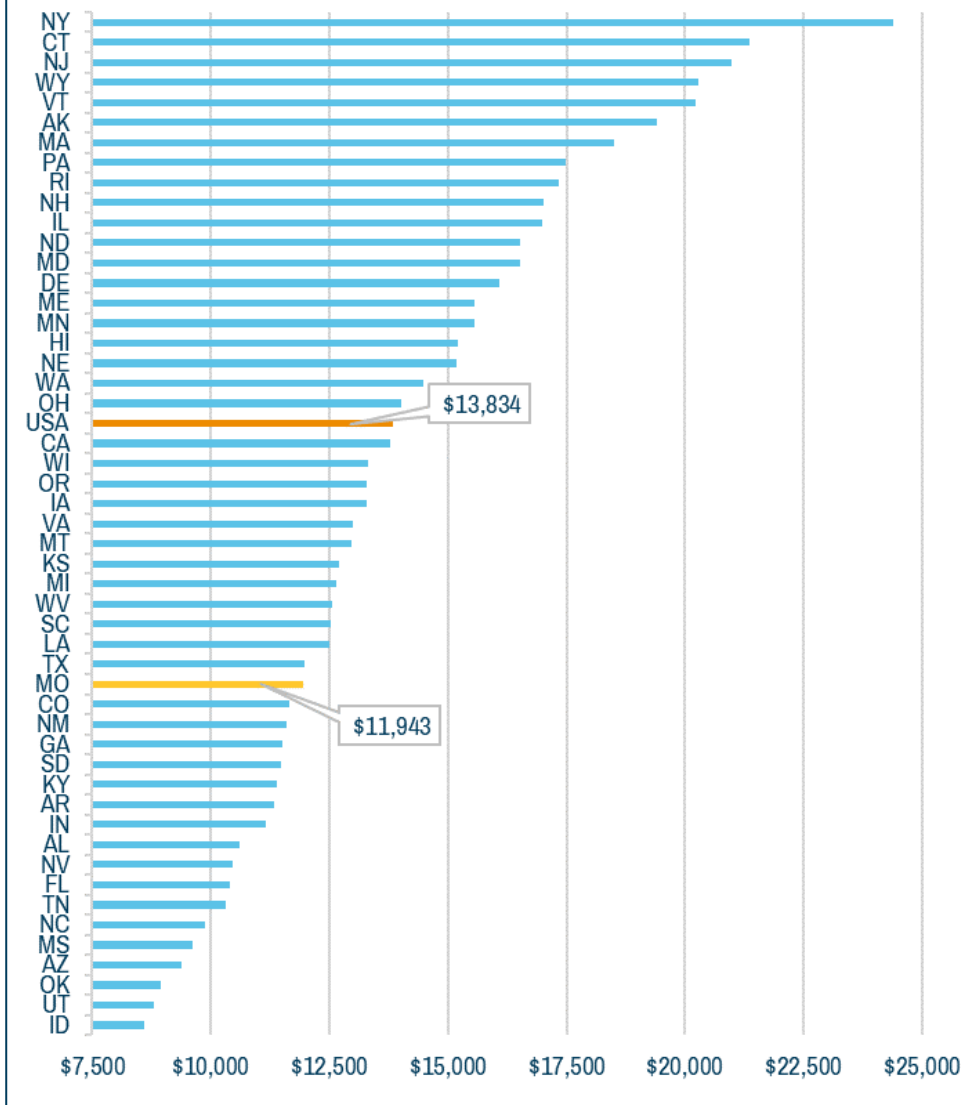
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### Special points of interest:

- Sixty-two percent of Missouri likely voters indicated support for increased spending in schools.
- Democrats and non-white likely voters indicated substantially higher support for spending increases than Republican and white likely voters.
- Nearly three quarters of Missourians support higher teacher salaries, the majority of whom indicated support for higher taxes to achieve salary increases.

**Figure 1: Average Total Per-Pupil Elementary and Secondary School Expenditures by State, 2016-2017**

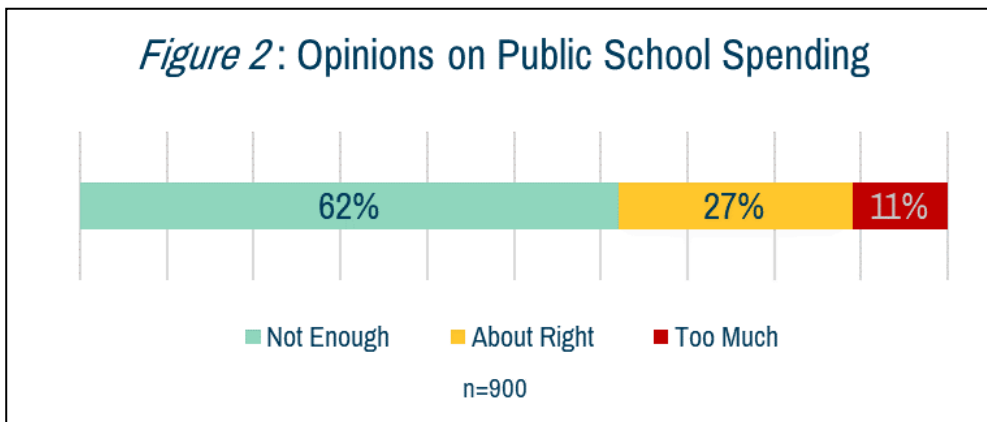


Our poll asked respondents to indicate whether Missouri school spending is “too much,” “not enough,” or “about right.” Sixty-two percent of Missourians reported Missouri school funding is not enough, 27% that it’s about right, and 11% that it’s too much. Those who report Missouri school funding is not enough, however, tend to underestimate how much schools actually spend (\$10,519 per pupil, on average). In fact, only 60% of Missourians estimated a statewide per-pupil spending figure within \$4,000 of the 2016-17 figure (i.e. between \$7,943 and \$15,943) and only 37% within \$2,000 (i.e. between \$9,943 and \$13,943). These more “accurate” respondents, however, similarly support increases to school spending, with between 60% and 65% of respondents indicating support, regardless of the estimated average school funding figure.

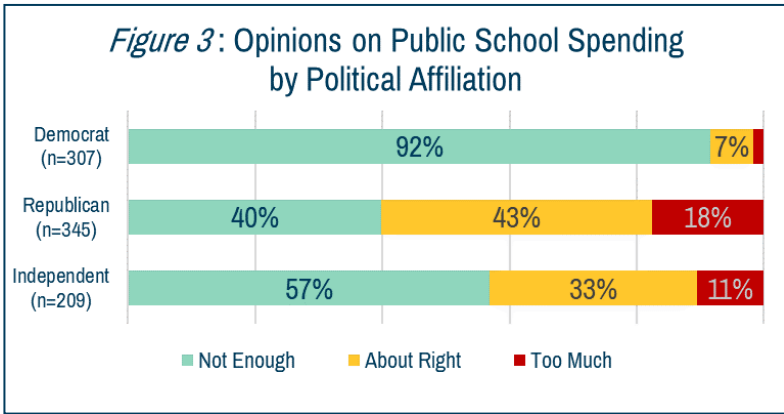
Democrats and Independents reported that Missouri school funding is not enough but tend to underestimate how much is spent (see Figure 3). On average, Democrats estimated Missouri spends \$10,142 per pupil while Independents estimated \$10,402. Sixty percent of Republicans reported Missouri school funding is about right or too much and were the most accurate in their school spending estimates (\$12,250 per pupil).

Nonwhite likely voters overwhelmingly (85%) supported increases to school funding, while 41% of white likely voters reported Missouri

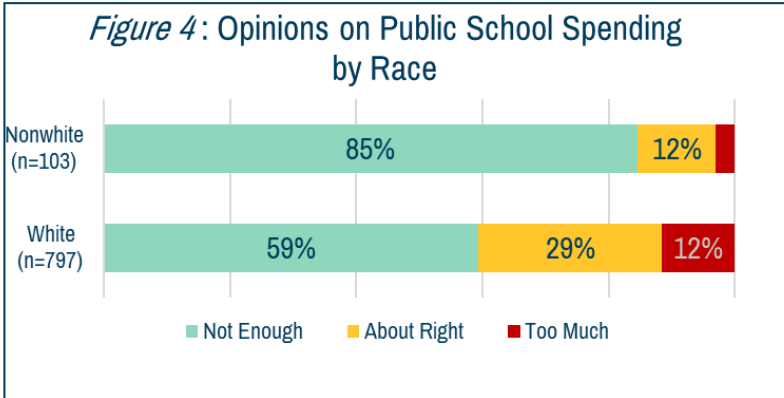
**Figure 2: Opinions on Public School Spending**



school funding is about right or too much (see Figure 4). Likely nonwhite voters’ estimates of Missouri school funding (\$11,491) were moderately closer to actual figures than likely white voters (\$11,017). In



addition, nonwhite voters also estimated that their local school funding lagged Missouri's statewide average by \$939 per pupil, an indication of the perceptions of unequal educational resources provided to different racial groups in the state.

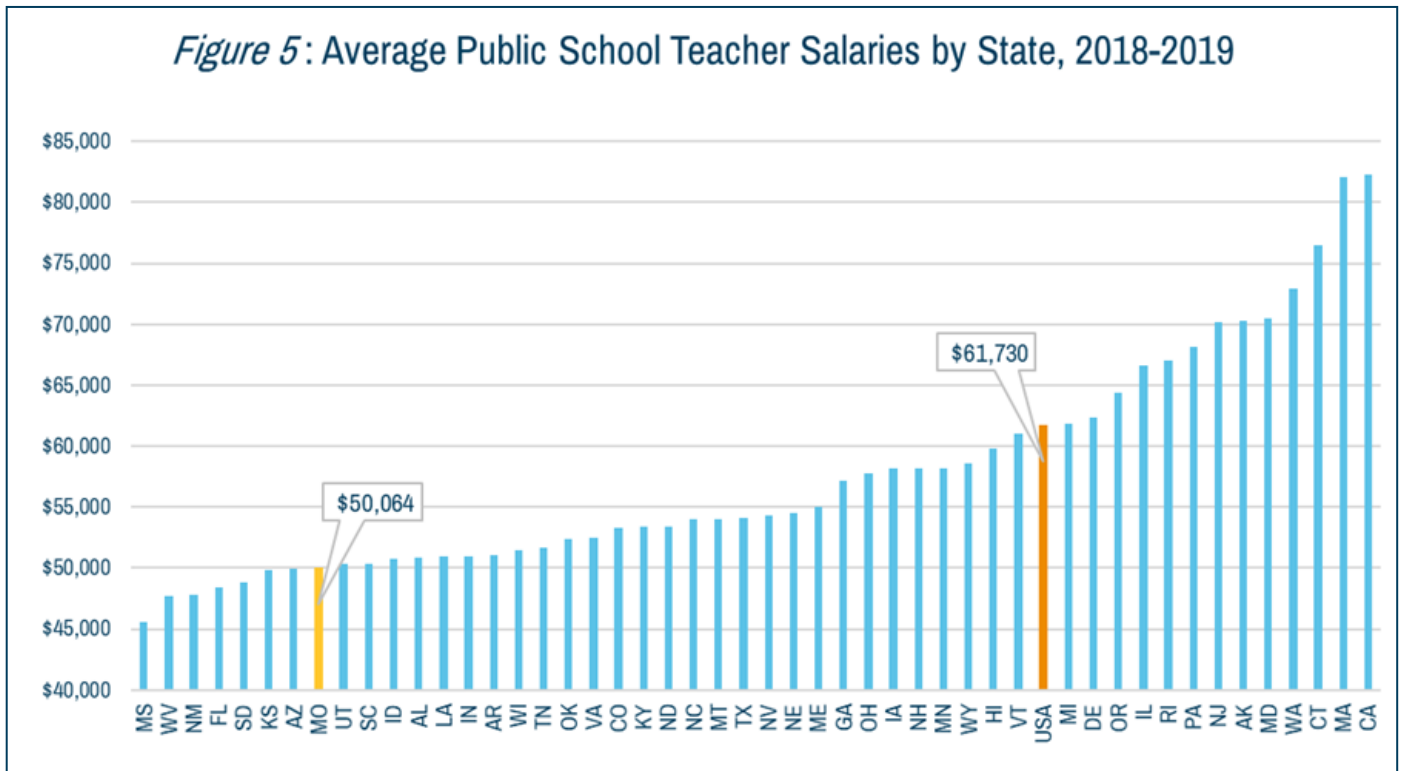


Responses varied along several other dimensions. For example, 71% of those who rate Missouri schools as poor or fair indicated the state's school funding is not enough compared to 44% of those who rate Missouri schools excellent or good. Though a majority in all age categories indicated support for higher spending, 81% of those 19 to 29 years old indicated support while only 50% of those 65 and older responded similarly. Seventy percent of college-educated Missourians report the state's school funding is not enough relative to 58% of those without a four-year degree. Finally, respondents with school-age children reported similar support for increased school funding (65%) as those without children (61%).

<b>Table 1: Opinions on Public School Spending</b>		
	<i>Missouri School Spending Is...</i>	
	(1) Not Enough	(2) About Right/Too Much
<i>Voter Opinion on School Quality</i>		
MO schools are poor/fair	71%	29%
MO schools are excellent/good	44%	56%
<i>Voter Age</i>		
19 to 29	81%	19%
30 to 49	69%	31%
50 to 64	56%	44%
65+	50%	50%
<i>Voter Education Level</i>		
Four-year degree	70%	30%
No four-year degree	58%	42%
<i>Have School-Age Children?</i>		
Yes	65%	35%
No	61%	39%

## Teacher Salaries

Teacher compensation constitutes the single largest element of public school district budgets.<sup>9</sup> Nationally, support for increases to teacher salaries has grown in recent years, with between half and three-quarters of those surveyed in the 2019 *Education Next* poll indicating their support for such increases, the highest amount since the poll began in 2008.<sup>10</sup> In January 2020, Missouri state education leaders and Governor Parson indicated support for increases to Missouri teacher salaries.<sup>11 12</sup> A plan to fund and implement such changes, however, did not materialize amid the ensuing COVID-19-induced economic recession and subsequent statewide budget cuts.<sup>13</sup>

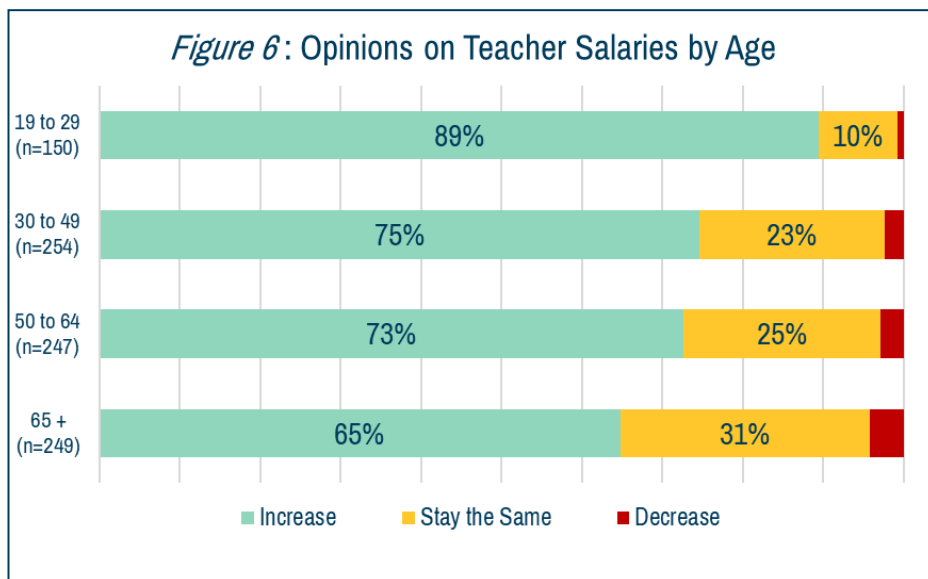


In the 2018-19 school year, Missouri teacher salaries averaged \$50,064, a figure which ranked the state 43<sup>rd</sup> in the nation and 19% lower than the average national teacher salary of \$61,730.<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding Missouri’s low cost of living, average teacher salaries in the state were six percent lower in real dollars in 2018-19 relative to 1999-2000, compared to one percent lower nationwide over the same time frame. Though these figures do not account for average teacher experience, teacher salaries in Missouri are low relative to most states, no matter how they may be calculated.

Poll respondents also were directed to guess the average salary of Missouri public school teachers and whether that average salary should increase, decrease, or stay the same. Likely Missouri voters slightly underestimated average teacher salaries in the state (\$45,455), though 74% indicated teacher salaries should increase and only 3% indicated salaries should decrease. Support was consistent among those with school-age children (72%) and those without (74%). Of those who believe general public education spending should increase, 92% supported increases to teacher salaries. Finally, 74% of respondents indicated support for higher salaries among those “who teach [a] difficult to staff subject (e.g. math, science, and special education)” relative to those in “easier to fill positions.”

Similar to overall school spending support, salary responses varied by voter political identification, race, and age, though the majority of respondents indicated support. Ninety-two percent of Democrats, 65% of Republicans, and 80% of Independents indicated support for increased teacher salaries. Eighty-six percent of nonwhite respondents versus 72% of white respondents support increases salary increases. Though there is near universal support to avoid decreases to teacher salaries, support for increasing teacher salaries declines as respondents’ age increases (see Figure 6).

*Figure 6: Opinions on Teacher Salaries by Age*



To those who indicated support for higher teacher salaries (n=665), we posed the following question: “To increase teacher salary, most states would require an increase in taxes. Would you be willing to pay more in taxes to pay teachers more?” Eighty-one percent of respondents indicated support for increased taxation, but responses varied along several dimensions. Broken down by party affiliation, 92% of Democrats and 65% of Republicans indicated support. Eighty-nine percent of college-educated Missourians supported tax increases, versus 76% of those in the state without a four-year college degree. Responses among

white voters (80%) and nonwhite voters (85%) were similar. A key caveat, less than 40% of likely Missouri voters estimated average state teacher salaries within \$10,000 of the 2018-19 average (i.e. between \$40,064 and \$60,064). Of the “accurate” sample, 68% favor higher teacher salaries, of whom 80% favor increased taxation to achieve salary gains.

## Conclusion

Missouri public school budgets face an uncertain future amid an unprecedented pandemic-induced recession. Despite these circumstances, a majority of Missourians support increases to public school spending, though there are wide differences between likely voters of differing political parties and race. Respondents also supported increases to teacher salaries via increases to taxation and a teacher pay structure which rewards those who teach in hard-to-staff subjects. It is important to note that our poll took place just a few weeks after the conclusion of the 2019-20 school year, a time when many parents were tasked with balancing work from home responsibilities and their child’s home learning needs. Therefore, it is possible these circumstances influenced voters’ responses to questions regarding school funding and teacher salaries. As the state’s economic circumstances evolve over the coming school year, we will keep a keen eye on statewide and local budget deliberations, particularly to examine if proposed spending matches Missourians expressed preferences.

## About the SLU/YouGov Poll

YouGov interviewed 900 Missouri likely voters between June 23, 2020 and July 1, 2020. The YouGov panel, a proprietary opt-in survey panel, is comprised of 1.2 million U.S. residents who have agreed to participate in YouGov Web surveys and regularly used by *CBS News* and *The Economist*. Using their gender, age, race, and education, YouGov weighted the set of survey respondents to known characteristics of registered voters of Missouri voters from the 2018 Current Population survey. The margin of error for the weighted data is 3.95%.

The SLU/YouGov Poll is directed by Steven Rogers, Ph.D. Associate Directors are Kenneth Warren, Ph.D. and Evan Rhinesmith, Ph.D.

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- <sup>5</sup> National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) *Digest of Education Statistics*: <https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/3-6-19sfp.pdf>.
- <sup>6</sup> Figure based on data obtained through the NCES *Digest of Education Statistics*: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19\\_236.75.asp?current=yes](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_236.75.asp?current=yes). The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) reports average per-pupil spending of \$13,613 in the 2018-19 school year. NCES and DESE figures may vary due to differences in enrollment figures used to calculate per-pupil expenditures.
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- <sup>14</sup> Figure based on data obtained through the NCES *Digest of Education Statistics*: [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19\\_211.60.asp?current=yes](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_211.60.asp?current=yes).