

# POLICY BRIEF: Canadians Support Changes to K-12 School System

Colin Craig and Bacchus Barua | March 2026



## Executive Summary

SecondStreet.org – in partnership with public opinion research firm Leger – has routinely polled Canadians to understand prevailing views on the public K-12 school system.

In 2020, the first time this was conducted, 32% of Canadians indicated the public school system was headed in the “wrong direction”. This proportion increased to 51% in 2023, and to 55% in 2024. This policy brief builds on past research and probes Canadians’ views on select reform options.

Highlights from the February 27–March 1, 2026 poll include:

- About half (53%) of respondents polled continue to believe the public school system has gone in the “wrong direction” over the past 20 years. Only about one-in-four (23%) indicated “right direction”, while the rest didn’t have an opinion.

- With regard to school choice, 56% of respondents support the introduction of public charter schools in their province (modelled on the Albertan approach) to provide students with additional schooling options within the publicly funded system. Only one-in-five oppose the idea.
- For matters of discipline, seven-in-ten (72%) support a return to more traditional responses to student misconduct, such as sending misbehaving students to the principal’s office, phone calls home, suspensions, etc.
- A similar proportion (74%) believe teachers should have the discretion to reduce a student’s mark on an assignment if it is handed in late.
- An overwhelming majority (77%) believe existing “no fail” policies, which move students up a grade regardless of performance, should be abandoned.
- With regard to curriculum and teaching methods, a majority (56%) of respondents believe schools should get back to basics and use traditional methods to teach core subjects, with the exception of the 18-24 age group among whom a consensus is unclear.

Overall, the results of this research should cause ministers of education, school boards, and others involved in setting education policy in Canada to pause and rethink reforms and changes to curriculum that have occurred over the past 20 years. In some cases, changes can be made to the system to address Canadians’ concerns, while in other cases increasing the education choices available for parents might be the best answer.

## Introduction

Since 2020, SecondStreet.org has retained public opinion research firm Leger to conduct a series of polls to better understand Canadians’ views on various aspects of the public K-12 education system. One of the questions routinely asked is whether or not people felt the system “is moving in the right direction to equip students with the skills they need to succeed and compete in life, work and post-secondary education.”

In the first poll, conducted in 2020, Leger found that 32% of Canadians indicated their respective public school systems was headed in the “wrong direction.”<sup>1</sup> While it was concerning at the time that so many felt the system had gone in the wrong direction, this segment of society grew to a majority when SecondStreet.org asked the question again in May 2023 (51%), and grew again in May 2024 (55%).<sup>2,3</sup>

This policy brief continues efforts to gauge the confidence of Canadians in their respective public K-12 school systems, identify challenges, and explore solutions. In particular, it builds on SecondStreet.org’s 2024 study, which examined aspects of the system that Canadians were most concerned about, including how schools handle matters of discipline and the content that is taught in schools.

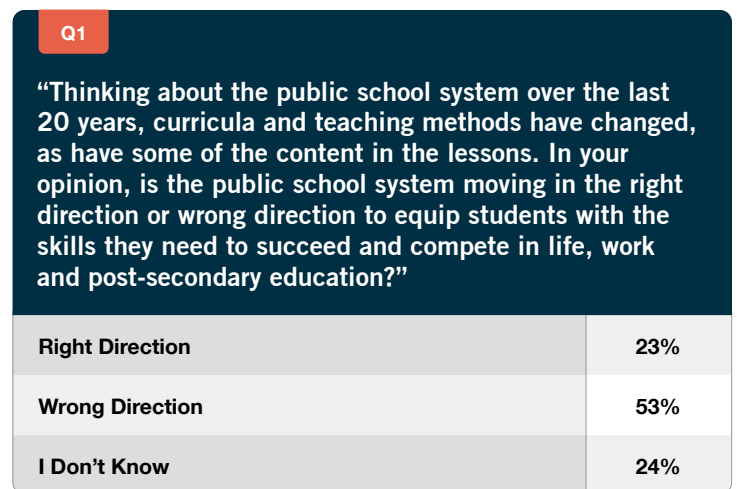
## Methodology

The data represented in this report is from a national online survey conducted by Leger of 1,659 Canadian adults between February 27 and March 1, 2026. The respondents to this survey were drawn from Leger’s online research panel, a representative sample of the broader Canadian population. Were this a probability sample, the margin of error of a survey of this size would be +/- 2.4%, 19 times out of 20. The numbers have been rounded to the nearest whole number and, as a result, may not add up to 100. Please see the appendix for detailed polling data.

## Findings

This section summarizes the broad results of each question and provides context where appropriate.

The first question asked respondents to reflect on the previous 20 years. Specifically, it asks them for their thoughts on whether the public K-12 school system has gone in the right (or wrong) direction with regard to its ability to equip students with the skills they need to succeed and compete in life, work and post-secondary education. For continuity, this is the same question that was asked in 2020, 2023 and 2024.<sup>a</sup>



The majority (53%) of respondents thought the public K-12 education system was going in the “wrong direction” with only 23% percent of respondents saying it was going in the “right direction”. Both responses are two percentage points lower than in 2024, with a four-percentage point increase in respondents who were unsure – suggesting a potential increase in uncertainty about the current state of K-12 education in Canada. Statistically, these findings are within the margin of error of what SecondStreet.org reported in 2024.

<sup>a</sup>The wording of the 2020 survey was slightly different, adding the phrase “Setting aside COVID-19” at the beginning of the question in consideration of the environment in which it was conducted.

Across the provinces, Manitoba/Saskatchewan (whose results were combined) were least likely to respond, “wrong direction” (42%), while Atlantic Canadians were most likely (61%). There was no province where the majority of respondents said the system was moving in the “right direction”. Although households with children were more likely to say the system was going in the “right direction” compared to others (29% vs 20%), the majority (54%) believed the system was headed in the wrong direction. Overall, women were more likely to say, “wrong direction” (57%) than men (49%).

The second question in the survey asked respondents about their interest in seeing public charter schools introduced in their province. These schools, currently unique to Alberta, are non-profit schools, funded by government, and do not charge tuition. They teach the provincial curriculum and often differ from traditional government-run schools in terms of how they teach (pedagogy) and the content they focus on.<sup>4</sup> For instance, the STEM Innovation Academy in Calgary focuses on science, technology, engineering and math, while the Calgary Classical Academy focuses on classical teaching (classic literature, art, Latin, history, etc.). This question was asked in every province, except Alberta – where charter schools are already present.

**Q2**

**“Parents in Alberta have a schooling option that other provinces do not have. The Alberta government funds non-profit schools that teach the provincial curriculum but do so in their own ways. For instance, one of these non-profit schools in Calgary focuses on science, technology, engineering and math while another focuses on classical teaching (classic literature, art Latin, history, etc.). These schools do not charge tuition and are known as public charter schools. Would you like your province to provide parents with the option to send their children to public charter schools?”**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>56%</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>19%</b>
<b>I Don't Know</b>	<b>25%</b>

The survey found that over half (56%) of Canadians would like their province to provide the option to send children to public charter schools, with only one-in-five opposed. Majority support was found across income levels and gender, while households with children (66%) were significantly more interested in these schools compared to others (53%). Among provinces, the highest support for the introduction of public charter schools was found in Quebec (61%), while the lowest was in Manitoba/Saskatchewan (48%).

Following reports of increasing violence in public schools, and past polling which showed strong concerns about a lack of discipline, SecondStreet.org asked Canadians whether the K-12 system should return to using traditional disciplinary measures in response to student misconduct. This would include sending misbehaving students to the principal’s office, phone calls home, suspensions, etc.<sup>5</sup>

**Q3**

**“Thinking about the public school system, some provinces have shifted away from discipline measures such as sending misbehaving students to the principal’s office, phone calls home, suspensions, etc. Do you believe the K-12 system should return to using those types of responses to student misbehaviour?”**

<b>Yes</b>	<b>72%</b>
<b>No</b>	<b>12%</b>
<b>I Don't Know</b>	<b>16%</b>

The survey found over seven-in-ten Canadians (72%) believed the system should return to using traditional disciplinary measures, with only 12% opposed. Support was slightly higher among women (74%) compared to men (70%), and significantly higher among rural respondents (81%) compared to those in urban settings (66%). Although there was some variation among age groups, a return to traditional disciplinary measures was supported by at least 60 percent of respondents across every age group surveyed.

And when the following question asked specifically about the ability for teachers to reduce marks for assignments submitted late, nearly three quarters (74%) of Canadians agreed. Although younger respondents between the ages of 18 and 34 (61%) and Quebecers (66%) were less likely to support giving teachers this discretion, they still represented the majority in both cases.

Q4	
“Should teachers have the discretion to reduce a student’s mark on an assignment if it is handed in late?”	
Yes	74%
No	15%
I Don’t Know	11%

The ability for teachers to reduce marks for late submissions varies considerably across the country. While guided by provincial recommendations, its application (or lack thereof) is usually determined at the school board/division level. For example, Ontario guidelines generally recommend issues related to incomplete or late work be relegated to the “learning skills and work habits section of their report card”; however, “[s]tudents in Grades 7 to 12 may also have marks deducted for submitting work late.”<sup>6</sup> In Alberta, the Parkland School Division explicitly states that “[g]rade reduction for late assignments is not permissible.”<sup>7</sup> And while BC’s Student Reporting Policy Framework does not make explicit reference to late assignments, it does state that “[s]tudents cannot have their mark penalized for missing classes or any other behaviour they demonstrate”. That being said, provisions allowing reductions for late assignments (rather than tardiness in general) may occur at the school level.<sup>b</sup>

Question five examined respondents’ attitudes towards “no-fail” policies in Canada. These policies, which were gradually introduced beginning in the 2000s, mean students were passed to the next grade automatically regardless of whether

they demonstrated an ability to understand core subject matter (reading, writing, math).<sup>9 10</sup>

Q5	
“Some schools have ‘no-fail’ policies. This means that regardless of whether a student has demonstrated they understand the core subject matter (reading, writing, math), they will be passed to the next grade automatically. Should no-fail policies be allowed?”	
Yes, we should have ‘no-fail’ policies	12%
No, we should not have ‘no-fail’ policies	77%
I Don’t Know	11%

The overwhelming majority (77%) of respondents opposed schools having no-fail policies, with the strongest opposition in Atlantic Canada. In other words, most Canadians believed students should be able to demonstrate their ability to understand core subject matter (reading, writing, math) in order to move on to the next grade. And while opposition to “no fail” policies was lower among households with children, about seven-in-ten (72%) respondents in this category thought schools should not have “no fail” policies.

Finally, question six sought to understand attitudes towards ongoing shifts in curriculum and teaching methods.<sup>11 12</sup> Specifically, respondents were asked if schools should get back to basics and use traditional methods to teach core subjects (reading, writing, math). For example, students traditionally learned how to read using phonics (learning the relationship between letters and sounds, decoding words by sounding them out, etc). The second possible response was for schools to continue to use the new methods they have developed for teaching reading, writing and math. For example, students now often learn how to read using a whole-language approach (teaching kids to recognize or guess whole words by remembering what they look like, or using visual cues like pictures, rather than sounding them out phonetically).<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> For example, one course outline for an International Baccalaureate program in a public school in BC clearly states that “[l]ate work will not receive full marks and may not be accepted.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>c</sup> Some schools also used “balanced literacy” which doesn’t teach phonics explicitly or systematically, but blends some phonics into the whole-word approach.

**Q6**

**“When it comes to the content schools are teaching students, and the methods for teaching students, which statement best represents your view?”**

<b>Schools should get back to basics and use traditional methods to teach core subjects</b>	<b>56%</b>
<b>Schools should continue to use the new methods they have developed for teaching reading, writing and math</b>	<b>25%</b>
<b>I Don't Know</b>	<b>18%</b>

The majority (56%) of respondents support a back-to-basics approach, with only one-in-four (25%) in support of continuing the shift to new methods. Support for a back-to-basics approach was highest in Ontario (60%) and lowest in Quebec (50%). A notable difference in support for back-to-basics approaches was observed between households with children and others, although the majority of respondents in both groups still supported a shift to traditional measures (51% and 59% respectively). The only group where a plurality (45%) supported a continued shift to new teaching methods was the 18-24 age band, with a slightly smaller proportion (43%) in support of a back-to-basics approach.

## Policy Options

The results of this survey suggest an ongoing dissatisfaction with the direction in which public K-12 systems are headed. There are two broad policy options to address identified concerns:

### 1) Change K-12 policies and practices in the public system

An earlier version of this report in 2024 found 63% of respondents thought that how schools handle student discipline and accountability matters were headed in the

wrong direction. This year’s update provides clear insights in terms of how these challenges should be addressed. Specifically, a majority of respondents supported a return to more traditional responses to student misconduct, such as sending misbehaving students to the principal’s office, phone calls home, suspensions, etc. Respondents also felt teachers should have the discretion to reduce marks for assignments handed in late and that “no fail” policies (which move students up a grade regardless of performance) should be abandoned.

Respondents also generally indicated a lack of confidence in the new methods of teaching employed by the K-12 system. This aligns with recent data that indicate declines in the performance of Canadian students on core subject matter compared to their international peers.<sup>13</sup> Unsurprisingly, a majority of respondents believed schools should get back to basics and use traditional methods to teach core subjects, with the exception of the 18-24 age group among whom a consensus is unclear.

### 2) Increase the options available to parents

Increasing the choices parents have when it comes to educating their children could help improve Canadian confidence in the school system.

For instance, in Alberta, charter schools are non-profit schools that are funded by the government and teach the provincial curriculum. As noted above, these schools can differ in terms of how they teach lessons, or they may focus on a particular area such as the trades, math and science and so forth. It is worth noting that a recent examination of provincial test scores in 2025 by SecondStreet.org found that, across 22 different tests from 2022-24, students in Alberta’s charter schools performed, on average, nearly a grade point higher than their peers in public schools.<sup>14</sup>

Vouchers are another option to consider. This approach allows parents to send their child to a non-government school, and a set allotment of funds would then flow from the government to that school.<sup>d</sup> Similar support policies could be developed to support those who prefer homeschooling for their children. The survey found that well over half (56%) of Canadians would like their province to provide the option to send children to public charter schools, with only one-in-five opposed.

Increased school choice could also be achieved by allowing parents to send their children to a wider variety of traditional government-run public schools. For example, instead of having to send a child to the nearest public school, allowing parents to send their child to any public school (aka open enrollment) could help parents find a solution they believe is suitable. In cases where parents find their local school presents unwelcome challenges – including an adverse ideological bent – perhaps a school a bit further away might provide more balance in its lessons or focus more on teaching those skills the parent believes are important and a better fit for their child. Some provinces already have “open enrollment” policies. To find out more information about K-12 policies and options in your province, you can visit [schooloptions.ca](https://schooloptions.ca).

## Conclusion

It should be concerning to those in the public education system that a majority of Canadians continue to believe the education system has gone in the wrong direction over the past 20 years. No government service should consider such findings acceptable.

Fortunately, the results of this survey also provide insights on what needs to change. Specifically, the polling data suggests majority support for increased discipline and accountability. Respondents are also in favour of abandoning existing “no fail”

policies and they generally support a back-to-basics approach with regard to content and teaching methods.

Respondents also clearly indicate interest in the introduction of public charter schools across Canada (modelled on the Albertan approach) to provide students with additional schooling options within the publicly funded system.

Officials in the public K-12 system – provincial governments and school boards especially – would be wise to delve deeper into the issues raised in this brief and to examine how to improve satisfaction with the public system.

## About The Authors

**Colin Craig** is President of SecondStreet.org. He has an MBA and a BA (Economics) from the University of Manitoba and is the author of *The Government Wears Prada*, a book that examines how governments could be more cost-effective and prepare for Canada’s aging population. More recently, Colin authored several chapters for the eBooks, *Life After COVID: What’s Next for Canada?* and *Healthcare Choice in Canada*. He has contributed to public policy changes at the federal, provincial and municipal levels in Canada.

**Bacchus Barua** is Research Director for SecondStreet.org. A Canadian economist with over 15 years of experience in the think tank world, he has provided frequent commentary on radio and television across Canada – including appearances on CBC, Global News, CTV, BNN and featured articles in the Wall Street Journal, National Post, Globe and Mail, Maclean’s and Forbes.com. Bacchus currently also serves as an affiliate scholar with the Canadian Health Policy Institute [CHPI] and was previously Director of Health Policy Studies at the Fraser Institute.

<sup>d</sup> Some provinces already have policies to ensure money follows the student to independent schools, to varying degrees. However, every province may benefit from a voucher system that expands choice, flexibility, and affordability.

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# Leger

Survey Report



## Education National Omnibus

Date: 03 / 04 / 2026  
Project: 10015686



# Methodology



## Method

Online survey via Leger's LEO panel, with n=1659 Canadians aged 18+.

## When

The weekly online omnibus was in field from February 27<sup>th</sup> to March 1<sup>st</sup> of 2026, inclusive, using Leger's online panel, LEO.

## Margin of error

For comparison purposes, a probability sample of this size (n=1659) yields a margin of error no greater than  $\pm 2.4\%$ , (19 times out of 20).

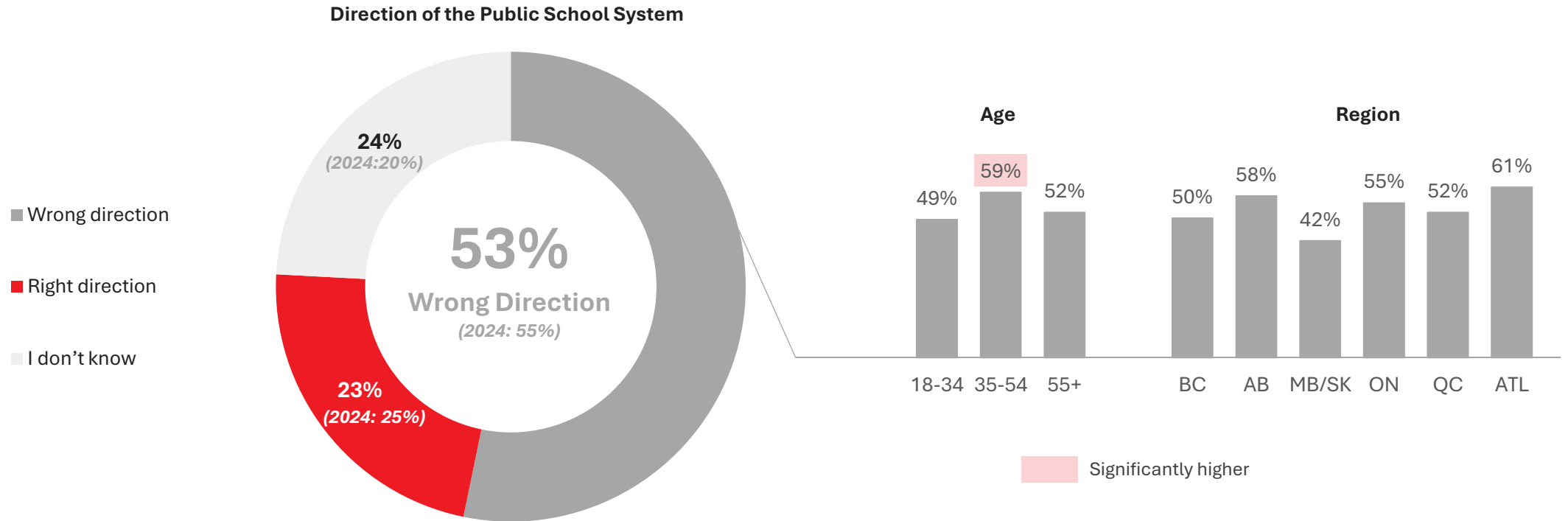
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# Detailed Results



# Majority of Canadians believe the public school system is headed in the wrong direction.

About a quarter think schools are on the right path or are unsure. Regionally, Atlantic Canadians, Ontarians, and Albertans express the strongest views that the system is headed in the wrong direction, particularly compared to those in the Prairies. Across age groups, those aged 35-55 are more likely to say the public school system is moving in the wrong direction.

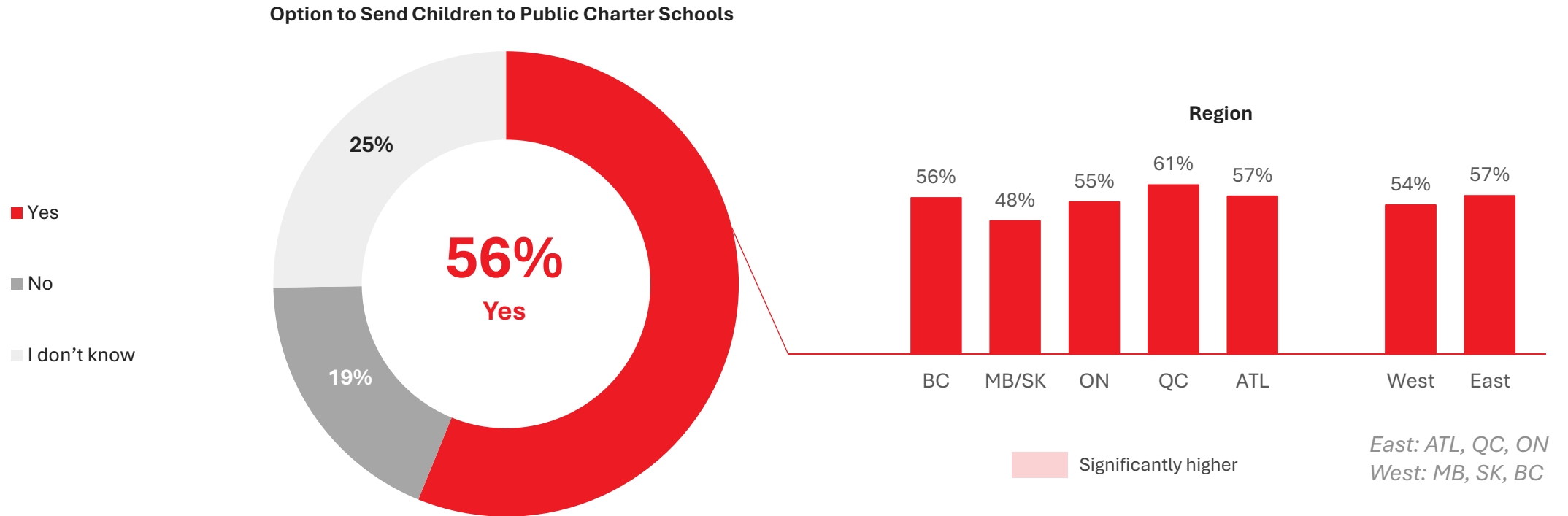


**CDEP1.** Thinking about the public school system over the last 20 years, curricula and teaching methods have changed, as have some of the content in the lessons. In your opinion, is the public school system moving in the right direction or wrong direction to equip students with the skills they need to succeed and compete in life, work and post-secondary education?

Base: All (n=1659)

## Excluding Alberta, over half of Canadians would like their province to provide the option to send children to public charter schools.

One-in-five would not like this option, whereas a quarter remain unsure. Quebecers (61% vs. 55% rest of Canada) and parents with children in their household (66% vs. 53% among those without children) are more likely to express interest in having the option to send their child to a public charter school similar to those in Alberta.

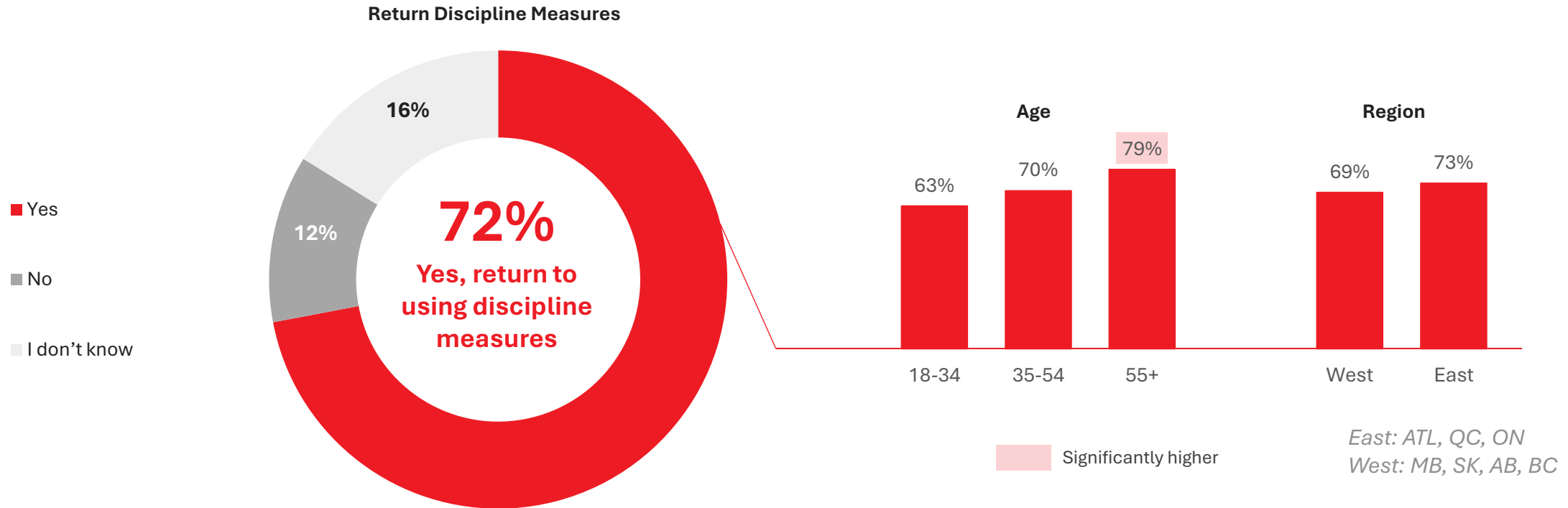


**CDEP2.** Parents in Alberta have a schooling option that other provinces do not have. The Alberta government funds non-profit schools that teach the provincial curriculum but do so in their own ways. For instance, one of these non-profit schools in Calgary focuses on science, technology, engineering and math while another focuses on classical teaching (classic literature, art Latin, history, etc.). These schools do not charge tuition and are known as public charter schools. Would you like your province to provide parents with the option to send their children to public charter schools?

Base: All, excluding respondents in Alberta (n=1516)

# Seven-in-ten Canadians believe the K-12 system should return to using traditional disciplinary measures to address student misbehaviour.

One-in-eight oppose these measures, while 16% are unsure. Sentiment is similar across provinces, with agreement directionally higher in Eastern Canada. Demographically, those aged 55+ are more likely to agree.

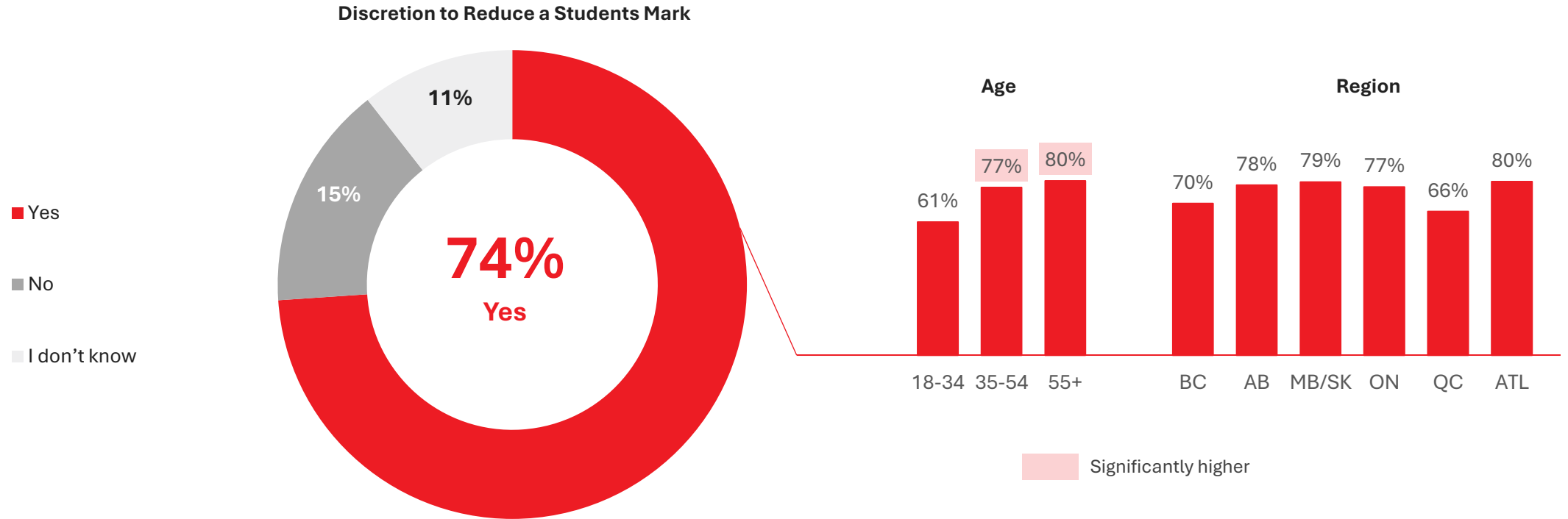


**CDEP3.** Thinking about the public school system, some provinces have shifted away from discipline measures such as sending misbehaving students to the principal's office, phone calls home, suspensions, etc. Do you believe the K-12 system should return to using those types of responses to student misbehaviour?

Base: All (n=1659)

# Three-quarters of Canadians believe teachers should have the discretion to reduce a student's mark if an assignment is submitted late.

The remaining quarter of Canadians either oppose reducing marks for late assignments or are unsure. Quebecers (66% vs. 76% in rest of Canada) and younger respondents are less likely to agree with teachers having this discretion.

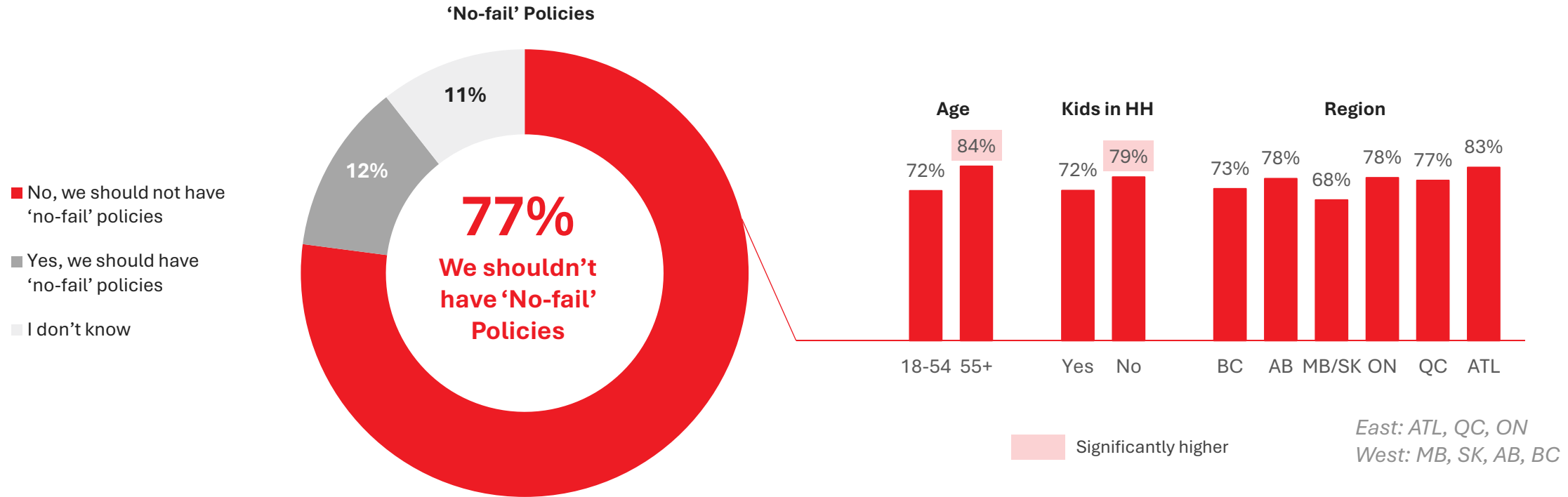


**CDEP4.** Should teachers have the discretion to reduce a student's mark on an assignment if it is handed in late?

Base: All (n=1659)

## Most Canadians oppose schools having ‘no-fail’ policies.

Only one-in-ten agree that schools should have ‘no-fail’ policies or are unsure. Opposition is strongest in Atlantic Canada and weakest in Prairies. Older respondents and those without children in their household are also more likely to oppose ‘no-fail’ policies.

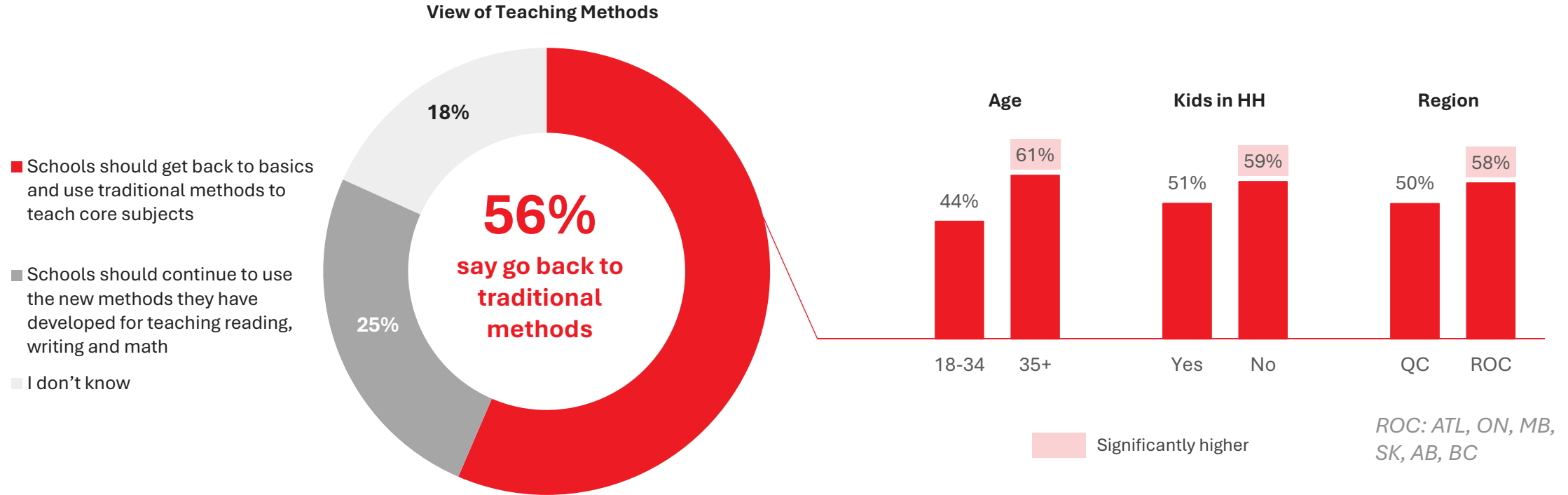


**CDEP5.** Some schools have ‘no-fail’ policies. This means that regardless of whether a student has demonstrated they understand the core subject matter (reading, writing, math), they will be passed to the next grade automatically. Should no-fail policies be allowed?

Base: All (n=1659)

# Over half of Canadians agree that schools should return to traditional teaching methods.

In contrast, a quarter favour keeping the current teaching methods, whereas two-in-ten are unsure. Quebecers (50% vs. 58% in rest of Canada) are less likely to say teachers should return to traditional teaching methods and are more likely to be unsure (22% vs. 17% rest of Canada).



**CDEP6.** When it comes to the content schools are teaching students, and the methods for teaching students, which statement best represents your view?

Base: All (n=1659)

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# Our Team



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