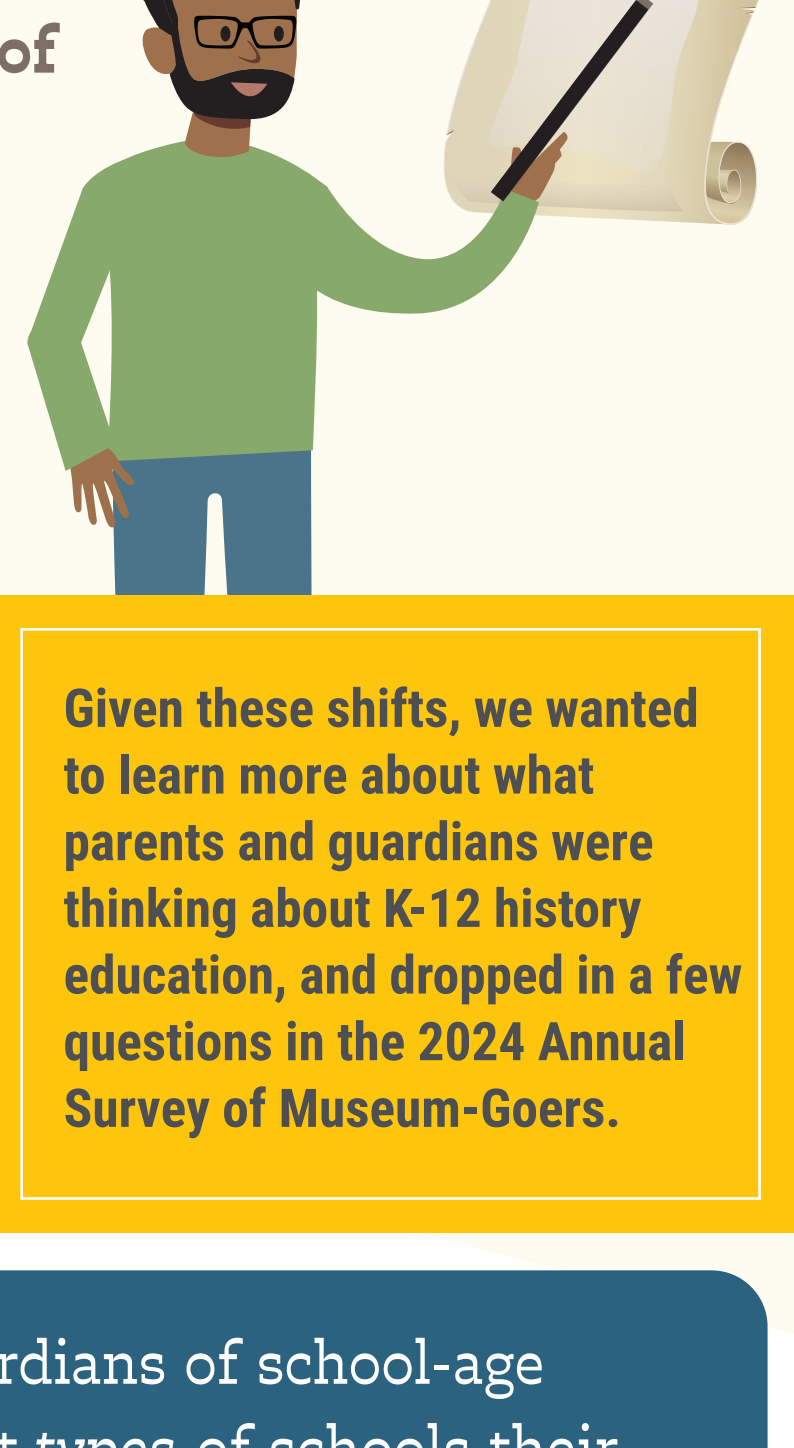


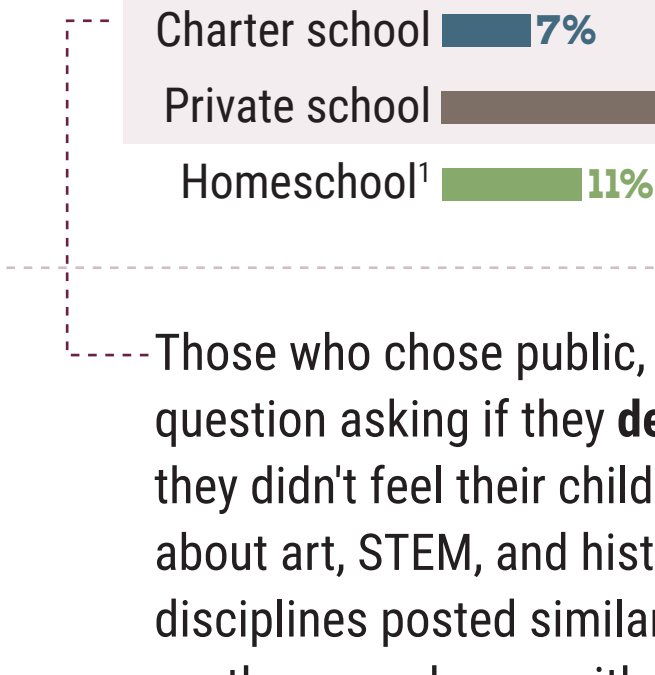
K-12 HISTORY EDUCATION, MUSEUMS, AND PERCEIVED CURRICULAR GAPS

A 2024 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY

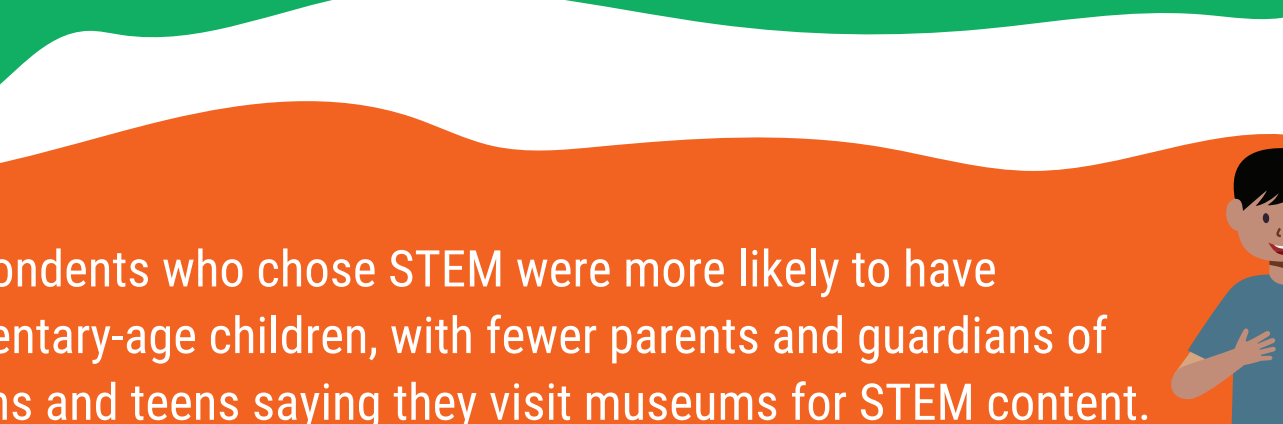
Over the past few years, the way history is taught in school has received a lot of scrutiny. In some places, state legislation and school boards have placed restrictions on what is taught, while other states have legislated a culturally responsive or inclusive curriculum.



Given these shifts, we wanted to learn more about what parents and guardians were thinking about K-12 history education, and dropped in a few questions in the 2024 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers.



First, parents and guardians of school-age children were asked what types of schools their children attended. They could choose more than one, since siblings could be in different types of educational environments. Here's what we found:



Those who chose public, charter, or private schools then received a question asking if they **deliberately** visited museums to fill in gaps they didn't feel their child's school covered adequately, asking about art, STEM, and history education specifically. Those three disciplines posted similar numbers, while a third of parents said no, they were happy with the school curriculum.



Overall, those who were happy with schools were more likely to have younger children (more in the K-2 range), so they likely were not perceiving curricular gaps ... yet.

Respondents who chose STEM were more likely to have elementary-age children, with fewer parents and guardians of tweens and teens saying they visit museums for STEM content. This suggests that parents and guardians of older children are not finding that the science content in museums is fitting their child's curricular needs effectively, presenting an opportunity for science museums to consider.

In contrast, respondents who chose art and history were more likely to have children in middle and high school, when those curricular gaps become most obvious.

The final question was only seen by parents and guardians who said they were seeking out history experiences.² We asked:

Thinking of history education specifically, what kind of history content do you want museums and historic sites to share? What do you think is missing or needs addressing from what is taught in your child's classroom?

We then hand-coded every *single* written-in response to this question, nearly 2,000. They fell into three main categories.

1 Straightforward

About a third of respondents gave rather straightforward responses that supported the value of history, but didn't veer into controversy. Common themes include:

Schools don't spend enough time on history

These responses either lamented that schools emphasized other subjects over history or that schools didn't have time to go in-depth on history topics.

"Elementary schools in my state gloss over social studies in favor of math and language."

"School classrooms only skim the surface of history. Museums do an outstanding job of filling gaps and adding depth."

Museums make history come to life

Most of these responses suggested that museums were the best educators for history due to the immersive, interactive, personal, object-based experiences we share ... making museums better than books, classrooms, and screens.

"Museums help kids see and touch things in person instead of in a classroom setting, in a book, on a screen. They get that experience of witnessing it right in front of them in some tangible form. They'll remember it more when they get to do that."

Local history

Local history doesn't make it into textbooks, and most history organizations are all about local history. So the value of local history also received a shout-out.

"Local stories. How are communities developed."

2 The less inclusive

While only 2% of responses were explicitly anti-inclusive, about 12% used coded language or tropes that are more likely to come from less-inclusive people.

Because explicitly anti-inclusive comments tend to be unkind, we are not sharing any of those.

Coded language

Over the past several years we have developed a list of certain words and phrases that we have learned are used to privilege a more narrow, typically celebratory, history that also tends to focus on the experiences of Europeans and white people. These include:

"Important," "significant," or "real" history

"Just the facts, so we can make up our own minds"

"Don't judge people of the past by today's values"

"History cannot/should not be erased" or "revisionist history"

"Only historically accurate content. Nothing rewritten or from a different perspective. Just stick to the facts and not present your own spin or opinion on things. Leave it up to the guests to draw their own conclusions."

Tropes and platitudes

These comments tend to be stock phrases and ideas that sound innocuous and tend to have little context around them. We put them in this category because less inclusive people are much more likely to use them than inclusive people. These include:

"Good, bad, and ugly" or "warts and all" approaches to history

Learning from mistakes of the past/history repeats itself

Inspiration of learning from sacrifices or successes of others

"They need to know the good and the bad that happened before us so history doesn't repeat itself."

3 The inclusive

The largest segment of respondents implored museums to provide the inclusive content schools could not provide. **In fact, we received nearly 15x more explicitly inclusive comments than explicitly anti-inclusive responses.**

On top of that, about twice as many people gave responses that *leaned* more inclusive and expansive than leaned less inclusive.

BOTTOM LINE: the response FOR inclusion was overwhelming.

More expansive history ... but not explicitly inclusive

Over a fifth of responses supported a more expansive understanding of the past, but didn't explicitly use inclusive language. These respondents were much more likely to come from inclusive respondents. Examples include:

A desire for multi-cultural content

The importance of uncomfortable and difficult history, typically with supporting context that demanded a more critical and thorough approach to the past

A need for more complete history with multiple viewpoints

"Increased global content. History in primary and secondary education is incredibly focused on US and some parts of European history."

"Approaches to history that are critical of heroic stories, approaches to history that pay attention to everyday objects and everyday experiences (not presidents and wars and political regime changes)."

Explicitly inclusive responses

Most of the inclusive responses were explicit about the need for diverse stories and perspectives. These included a smaller number of comments lamenting history censorship and teaching restrictions.

"There needs to be more inclusive history content of cultures and societies that are not as well covered in standard past lessons, and content of past issues in our history should be addressed and not hidden or whitewashed over."

"Any topic that is considered controversial in public schools should be addressed! The list seems to get more exhaustive every day. Teachers fear retribution if certain topics are taught. Teach those."

There was also a fundamental shift in comments from inclusive people that we had not seen before: they were taking the language of anti-inclusive people and using it to promote inclusive history. That is, we saw far more respondents specifically say they support critical race theory, say revising history was a critical part of historiography, and calling history censorship "indoctrination." They are also looking to history museums to champion a more inclusive history.

And history museums should, because exploring all the evidence of the past is morally the right thing to do—even if it is controversial. Bravery in this moment matters ... and in this case, the brave choice is one that is also supported by a majority of the public.³

"History is written by the winners. And that's what kids learn in school. I'd like to visit museums that share different stories and perspectives that they don't get exposed to at school. Get controversial. Ruffle up some feathers. The kids need to learn that just because the winners 'won' and wrote the story doesn't automatically mean that they were 'good' or 'heroic' or something we should look up to and be inspired by, or that their story is the only one that matters."

Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include:
 - 2024 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, n = 90,178; 202 museums participating
 - 2023 Broader Population Sampling, n = 2,154
 - 2017 - 2023 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers

¹ Data Stories share research about both frequent museum-goers (typically visit multiple museums each year) and the broader population (including casual, sporadic, and non-visitors to museums).

² A side benefit of this line of inquiry is a robust national sample of homeschool families. Stay tuned for a Data Story about them.

³ We intend to cycle through art and STEM over the next two Annual Surveys.

⁴ See the Data Story "Inclusive Attitudes: Shifts Over Time"

More Data Stories can be found at wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories.