

# Who Knows Affects Who Goes: How Race and Income Influence Public Opinion on Montessori Education

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## BACKGROUND

Given the increase in the number of public Montessori programs across the United States, it is important to consider who participates in these programs. The history of Montessori in the United States is intertwined with questions of race and class (Debs, 2019). Despite evidence that Montessori schools have the potential to close racial and socio-economic achievement gaps (e.g., Brown & Lewis, 2017; Culclasure, et al., 2018; Lillard et al., 2017), students of color and disadvantaged students are often underrepresented in Montessori programs (Culclasure et al., 2018; Debs & Brown, 2017).

While there are many possible explanations for this phenomenon, two likely reasons are differential knowledge concerning Montessori education and differing preferences regarding school characteristics across various subgroups of parents. It is important to identify who says that they have knowledge of the Montessori model and how accurate their knowledge is. While past research in this area is limited, Murray's (2008, 2012) survey analysis is the leading work on this question. When it comes to parental preferences, previous researchers on this topic have surveyed or interviewed Montessori parents in an effort to understand why they chose Montessori (e.g., Debs, 2019; Hiles, 2018). However, these studies do not examine why some parents may not be interested in Montessori education.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How knowledgeable are parents about Montessori education?
2. Do parents support the Montessori approach to education?
3. How does knowledge and support of Montessori education differ by subgroup?

## RESEARCH METHODS

Data for this analysis come from a national survey of parents of children aged 0-17 years old. I contracted with Qualtrics to get access to their panel of respondents. The survey was in the field from late September to mid-October 2022. A quota sampling method was used to create the sample. The sample matches the demographics of American adults based on race/ethnicity, income, and education. While the sample is not nationally representative, it does reflect the population in important ways. In total, 750 parents participated in the survey. The survey instrument was created in consultation with Montessori experts. Some questions were taken from Murray (2008, 2012) in order to replicate the previous analyses.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

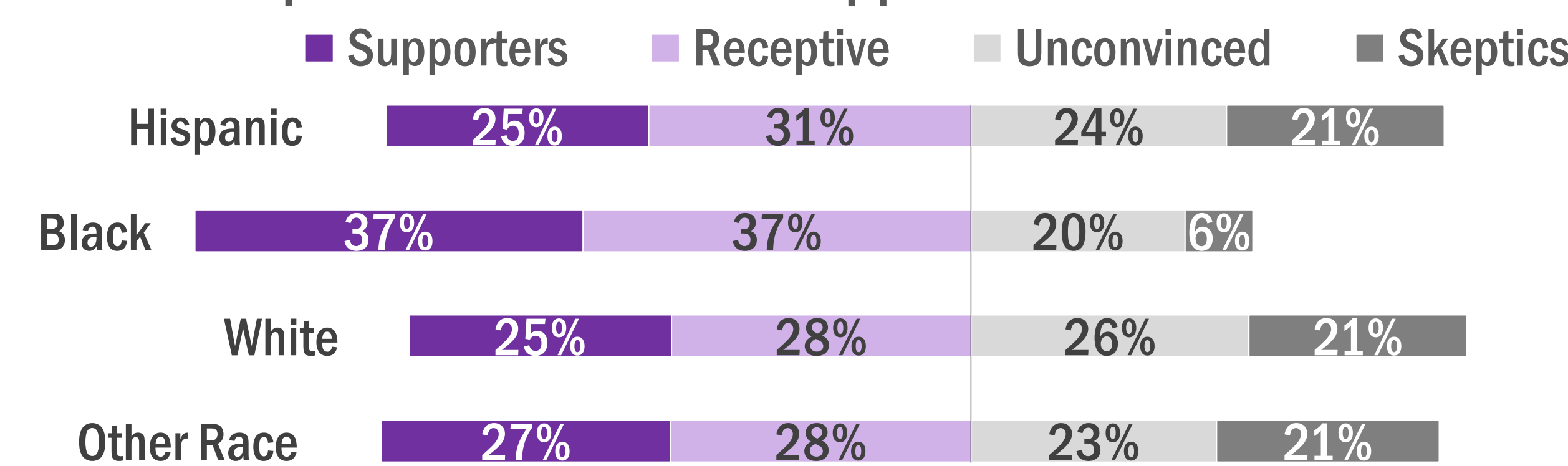
**Knowledge of Montessori:** Parents were asked if they had heard of the term, "Montessori Education" and, if so, how knowledgeable they were about Montessori. **Approximately 46% of parents said that they were at least "slightly knowledgeable" about the Montessori approach to education.** These parents were then asked nine True/False questions about Montessori education. On average, parents answered 4.4 questions correctly. **Parents demonstrated low knowledge levels when it came to the existence of public Montessori schools.**

**Support for Montessori:** Parents who were at least "slightly knowledgeable" about Montessori education were asked how much they support the Montessori method. **Amongst these knowledgeable parents, approximately 58% of respondents supported the Montessori approach "a great deal" or "a lot".** The 54% of the survey respondents who were not knowledgeable about Montessori received information about the method. They were then asked their level of support. **Amongst parents with less familiarity with Montessori, about 54% agreed with the approach to education after reading a description.**

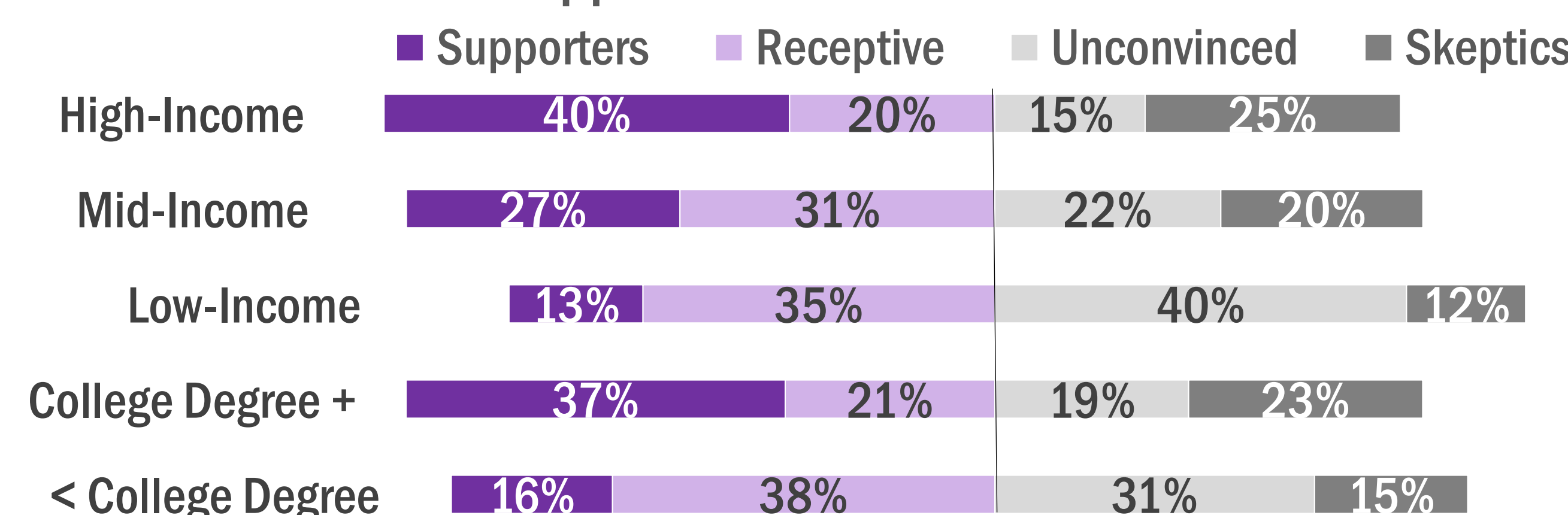
**Groups for Analysis:** Using parents' level of knowledge of Montessori and their support for Montessori, I categorized parents into four groups:

**Supporters:** These parents are at least slightly knowledgeable about Montessori, and they support it "a great deal" or "a lot." → **27% of Parents**  
**Receptive:** These parents were unfamiliar with Montessori but strongly/ somewhat agreed with the approach after reading about it. → **29% of Parents**  
**Unconvinced:** These parents were unfamiliar with Montessori and did not agree with the Montessori approach after reading about it. → **25% of Parents**  
**Skeptics:** These parents are at least slightly knowledgeable about Montessori but supported it only a moderate amount or less. → **19% of Parents**

### Black parents are the most supportive of Montessori



### High education and high income parents are more supportive of Montessori



## DISCUSSION

This analysis found that not quite half of parents were familiar with Montessori education and had at least a minimum amount of knowledge about it. That is largely consistent with previous work, as Murray (2008) found 51% of the public had at least some knowledge of Montessori. When examining factual knowledge of Montessori, I found that parental knowledge is often lacking. For example, less than 30% of parents knew that Montessori education exists in public schools. Parents were generally in support of the Montessori approach, which explains why it has expanded in both the public and private sectors. One limitation to the growth of Montessori is that many parents were unaware of the approach. Once Montessori was described to these parents, most of them supported it.

Support for Montessori is not limited to one racial or socio-economic group. Rather, I found widespread support for the Montessori model. **Black parents were the least likely to have heard of Montessori but were the most likely to support the approach. High-education and high-income parents had higher levels of knowledge and support of the Montessori model.** Those who want to expand Montessori should continue to try to educate the public on the approach, as many parents have misconceptions of Montessori. **This analysis suggests that the reason that white and high-income students are overrepresented in some Montessori programs is not because the Montessori model does not appeal to other parents. Rather, diversity in these schools could be enhanced if more parents of color knew about Montessori and if other barriers these parents face were diminished.**

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