



Uncommonly Popular: Public Support for Teaching the Success Sequence in School

By Nat Malkus

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Key Points

- Large majorities of all Americans (77 percent) and American parents (76 percent) support teaching students the success sequence—which states that young people who get at least a high school degree, have a job, and get married before having children are more likely to be financially secure and avoid poverty in later life.
- Among groups with the weakest support, such as millennials, Black Americans, and Democrats, the percentage in favor of teaching the success sequence was twice the percentage in opposition.
- Seven in 10 respondents who were most distant from adhering to the success sequence—because they had not graduated high school, were unmarried parents, or were currently not working—supported teaching it to students.

Young people who graduate from high school, get a job, and get married before having children, in that order, are far less likely to be in poverty and far more likely to have a solid footing in the middle class later in life. This path to adulthood has been dubbed the “success sequence.”¹

Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill were the first to demonstrate the association of the success sequence to the absence of poverty in later life.² That association has been repeatedly shown in data on different generations and for different subgroups.³ The strength of this association, such as Wendy Wang and W. Bradford Wilcox showing that “97 percent of millennials who follow . . . the ‘success sequence’ . . . are not poor by the time they reach their prime young adult years (ages 28–34),”⁴ has led proponents to argue that students should be expressly

taught about the success sequence to shine light on the broadest road to, well, success.⁵

The success sequence may seem like common, mainstream advice to some. However, among academics and even more so among scholars in think tanks, its appropriateness as both an idea and a topic to be taught to students is hotly contested.

Some critics of the success sequence claim that it leaves out structural inequities and inordinately focuses on individual agency.⁶ Others have objected to the success sequence because it objectifies particular cultural views.⁷ Some, from both the left and the right, argue the success sequence is merely descriptive of the attributes of the nonpoor, rather than a causal chain leading out of poverty.⁸ These critiques have their merits. Structural inequalities make achieving the success sequence much harder

for some subgroups, and for some subgroups, such as Black Americans, returns to the success sequence are relatively smaller than average while still associated with a substantially diminished likelihood of being in poverty.⁹

The cultural norms and values embedded in the success sequence are neither universal nor objectively good, and teaching it could alienate some, especially those who have deviated from it. However, proponents argue that whether you employ the success sequence as a normative argument about how young people should behave or as a pragmatic path that leads away from poverty, it would be a gross error to not teach young people about a sequence that is so strongly associated with avoiding poverty.¹⁰

Clearly, debates over the success sequence remain unsettled in rarified circles, but maybe that isn't important compared to public opinion on teaching the success sequence. Particularly in this season of contested views about what should and should not be taught in school and who should decide, a detailed description of what the public believes about teaching the success sequence should inform these discussions.

In this report, I provide such a description using data from the August 2021 American Perspectives Survey (APS) conducted by the Survey Center on American Life at the American Enterprise Institute.¹¹ The August APS asked 2,652 American adults, including an oversample of 610 parents with children under age 18, about a range of opinions on education, including their views on teaching the success sequence to high school students.

The APS's large nationally representative sample of both adults and parents allows me to describe public opinion on the success sequence overall and by a range of subgroups.

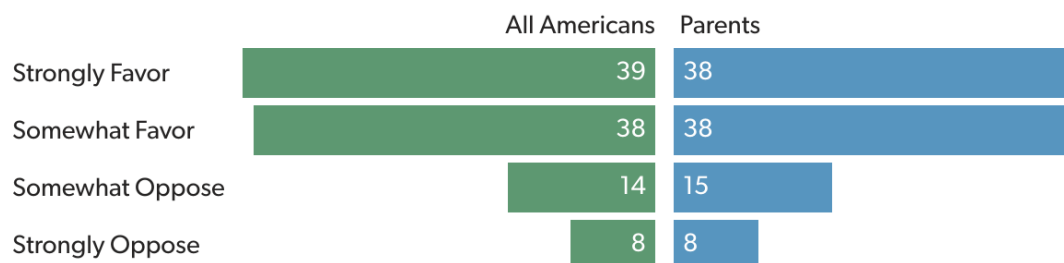
Overall, I found strong majorities of the public and parents support teaching the success sequence in public schools. While differences in the strength of that support align with some critiques of the success sequence, support is at least double opposition for nearly every subgroup examined.

The APS gauged public opinion about teaching the success sequence by asking whether respondents favor or oppose the following: *teaching students that young people who get at least a high school degree, have a job, and get married—before having children—are more likely to be financially secure and to avoid poverty in later life*. Respondents could respond that they strongly favored, somewhat favored, somewhat opposed, or strongly opposed teaching this content.

Seventy-seven percent of Americans either somewhat favored or strongly favored teaching the success sequence, while roughly 14 percent of Americans were somewhat opposed and 8 percent of Americans were strongly opposed (Figure 1). This margin of support is uncommonly strong and comparable to what respondents answered for whether they support teaching that “slavery was the primary cause of the Civil War” or displaying a Christmas tree on school property during school days. Looking across most subgroups of respondents, support remained high. For instance, parents' opinions of the success sequence almost exactly mirrored the general public's. While every subgroup demonstrated majority support, interesting

Figure 1. Support for Teaching Students About the Success Sequence in Public Schools

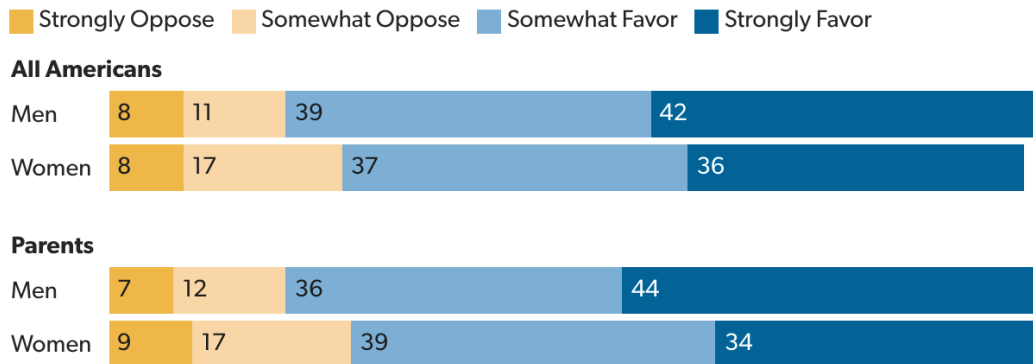
Percentage who favor or oppose teaching the success sequence in public schools



Note: Figure may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 2,625). Source: American Perspectives Survey, August 2021.

Figure 2. Support for Teaching the Success Sequence by Gender and Parenthood

Percentage who favor or oppose teaching the success sequence in public schools



Note: Figure may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 2,625). Source: American Perspectives Survey, August 2021.

divisions across respondents differ by generation, parenthood, education, race, gender, political affiliation and ideology, and adherence to the success sequence. I examine each in turn below.

Gender

In general, more men than women strongly favored teaching the success sequence. Overall, 42 percent of male adults strongly favored the success sequence, compared to 36 percent of women (Figure 2). Among parents, that gap in strong support was larger. Forty-four percent of fathers strongly support teaching the success sequence, compared to 34 percent of mothers. Although differences in total support (including those who *somewhat* or *strongly*

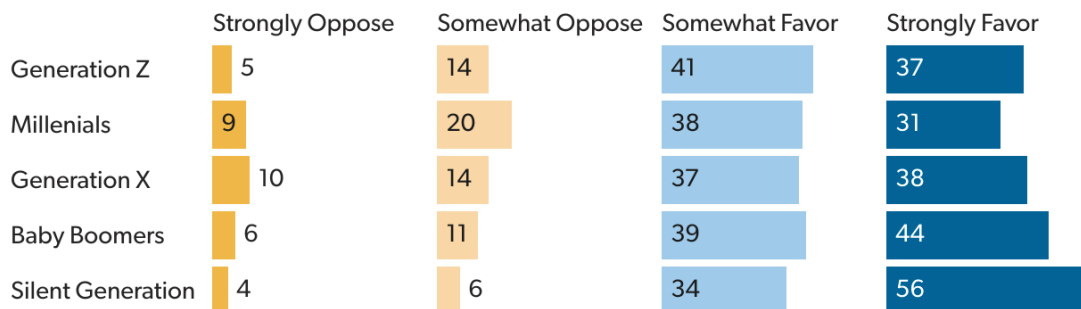
favor) are moderated by slightly higher relative proportions of women and mothers *somewhat* favoring teaching the success sequence, both men and fathers have higher net support. Men are 7 percent more supportive on net than women are (81 percent vs. 73 percent), and fathers are 6 percent more supportive than mothers are (79 percent vs. 73 percent).

Generation

For the most part, older generations expressed relatively stronger support for teaching the success sequence in public schools. The silent generation showed the strongest support, with 56 percent strongly in favor and 34 percent somewhat in favor, with slightly lower support among baby boomers.

Figure 3. Generational Support for Teaching the Success Sequence

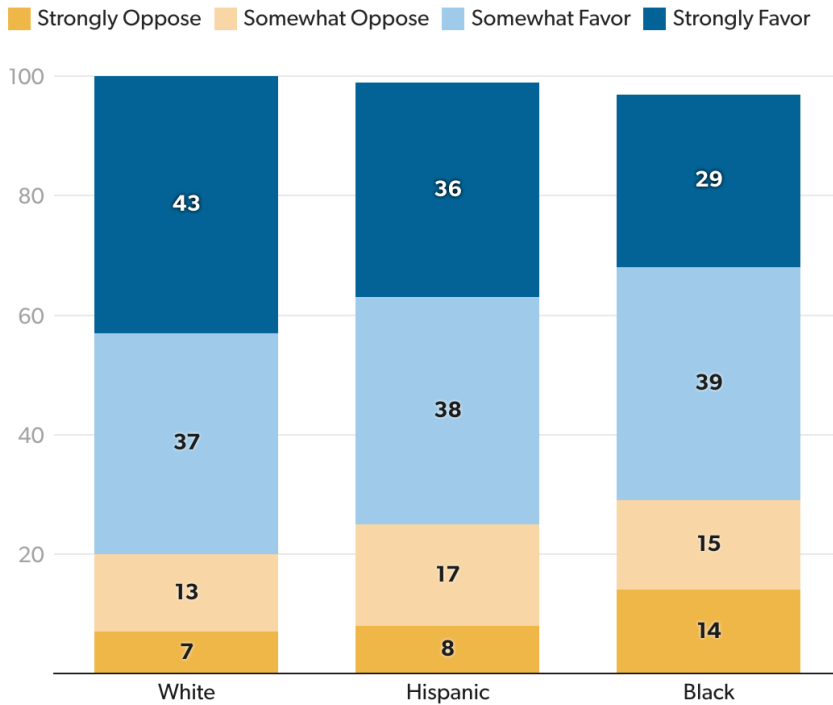
Percentage who favor or oppose teaching the success sequence in public schools



Note: Figure may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 2,625). Source: American Perspectives Survey, August 2021.

Figure 4. Support for Teaching the Success Sequence by Race and Ethnicity

Percentage who support or oppose teaching the success sequence in public schools



Note: Figure may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 2,625). Source: American Perspectives Survey, August 2021.

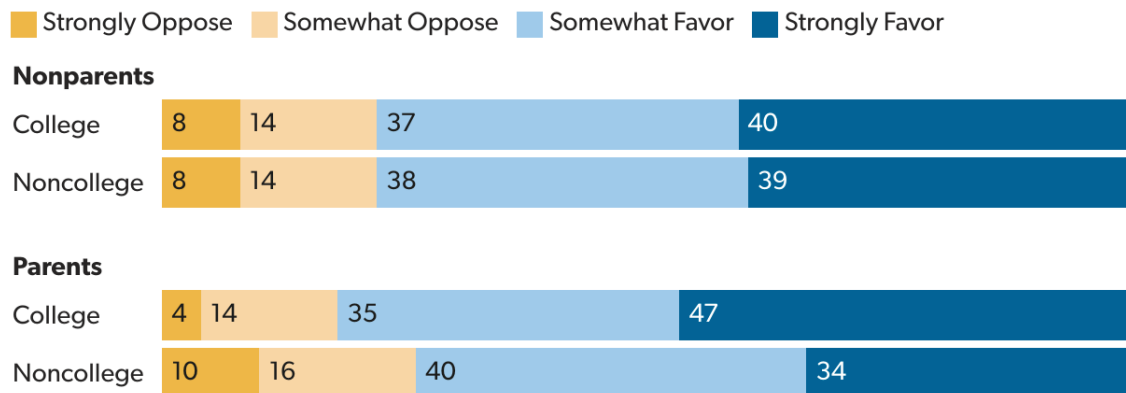
Generation Z and Generation X support was near the average of all adults, at 78 and 75 percent, respectively (Figure 3). Millennials, who were born between Generation Z and Generation X, had the lowest level of support, but still 69 percent of them favored teaching the success sequence.

Race

Differences by race show relatively higher support for teaching the success sequence among White adults and lower support among Black adults. Among White adults, 43 percent strongly favored teaching the success sequence, while just 29 percent of Black adults did so (Figure 4). Strong opposition showed the reverse, with higher strong opposition among Black adults compared to White adults (14 percent vs. 7 percent).

Figure 5. Educational Attainment and Support for Teaching the Success Sequence by Parenthood

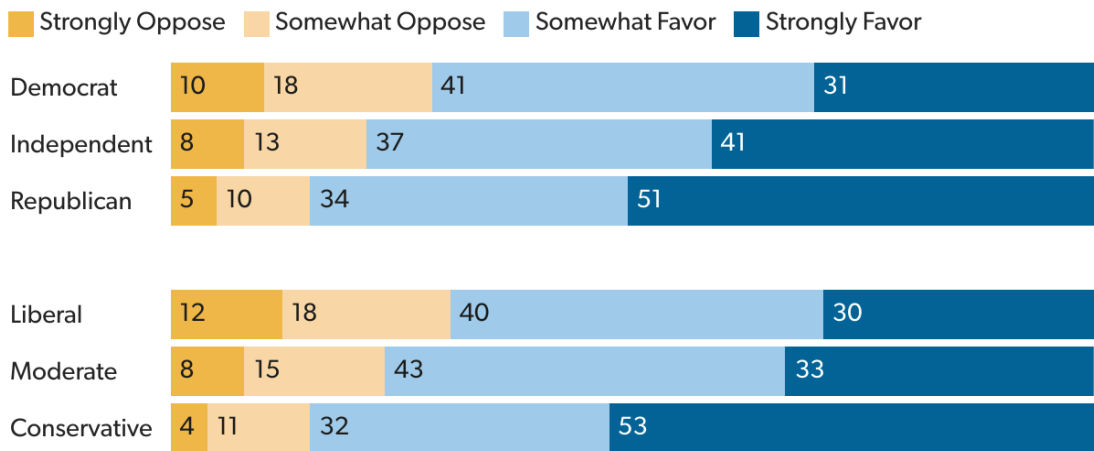
Percentage who favor or oppose teaching the success sequence in public schools



Note: Figure may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 2,625). Source: American Perspectives Survey, August 2021.

Figure 6. Support for Teaching the Success Sequence by Political Party and Ideology

Percentage who favor or oppose teaching the success sequence in public schools



Note: Figure may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 2,625). Source: American Perspectives Survey, August 2021.

College vs. Noncollege

Across educational levels, the success sequence was consistently popular. Similar percentages of nonparents with a college degree and with less than a college degree supported teaching the success sequence (77 percent each) (Figure 5). While support is similar among nonparents with a college degree and with less than a college degree, the same cannot be said among parents.

Eighty-two percent of parents with a college degree favored teaching the success sequence, compared to 73 percent of parents with less than a college degree. That gap was primarily driven by strong support, which 47 percent of college-educated parents had, compared to just 34 percent of parents without a college degree.

Political Party and Ideology

Political identification and self-described ideology showed some of the largest and most uniform differences in opinion on teaching the success sequence. Although favored by majorities across these groups, teaching the success sequence has more support (strongly or somewhat favor) among Republicans (85 percent) than among independents (78 percent) or Democrats (72 percent) (Figure 6).

Contrasts among Republicans, Democrats, and independents are driven primarily by the strongly favor category. Thirty-one percent of Democrats and 41 percent of independents expressed strong support for teaching the success sequence, both substantially lower than the 51 percent of Republicans who expressed strong support. Democrats were the most likely to somewhat or strongly oppose teaching the success sequence. One in 10 Democrats claimed to be in strong opposition, and, when factoring in somewhat opposed Democrats, over a quarter (28 percent) opposed in total.

Among Democrats, opposition to teaching the success sequence was higher among parents (34 percent, data not shown in Figure 6) than with Democrats at large (28 percent). For Republicans and independents, parents show similar opinions to all adults who identify with the same political party.

Unsurprisingly, patterns by political ideology were similar to party identity. Self-described conservatives were, by far, the most supportive of the success sequence (85 percent), with over half (53 percent) being strongly in favor. Moderates showed less support than conservatives did (76 percent), with 33 percent in strong support. Liberals showed still weaker support, with 70 percent favorable overall, and only 30 percent were strongly favorable.

Adherence to the Success Sequence

The APS data do not capture whether all respondents had followed the success sequence themselves. However, they do provide some means of identifying subsets that did not, in terms of educational attainment and having children without ever marrying, and another subset that has some distance from the success sequence in terms of its current work status. These include adults with less than a high school degree and adults who have never been married and have children under age 18.

By definition, respondents in each group did not adhere to the success sequence. While the APS does not capture employment in the order prescribed by the success sequence, I also look at adults who are not retired and not currently working and thus may be alienated by the success sequence work requirement logic. I examine these groups specifically based on the assumption that they may be most likely to feel blamed or shamed by the logic of the success sequence.

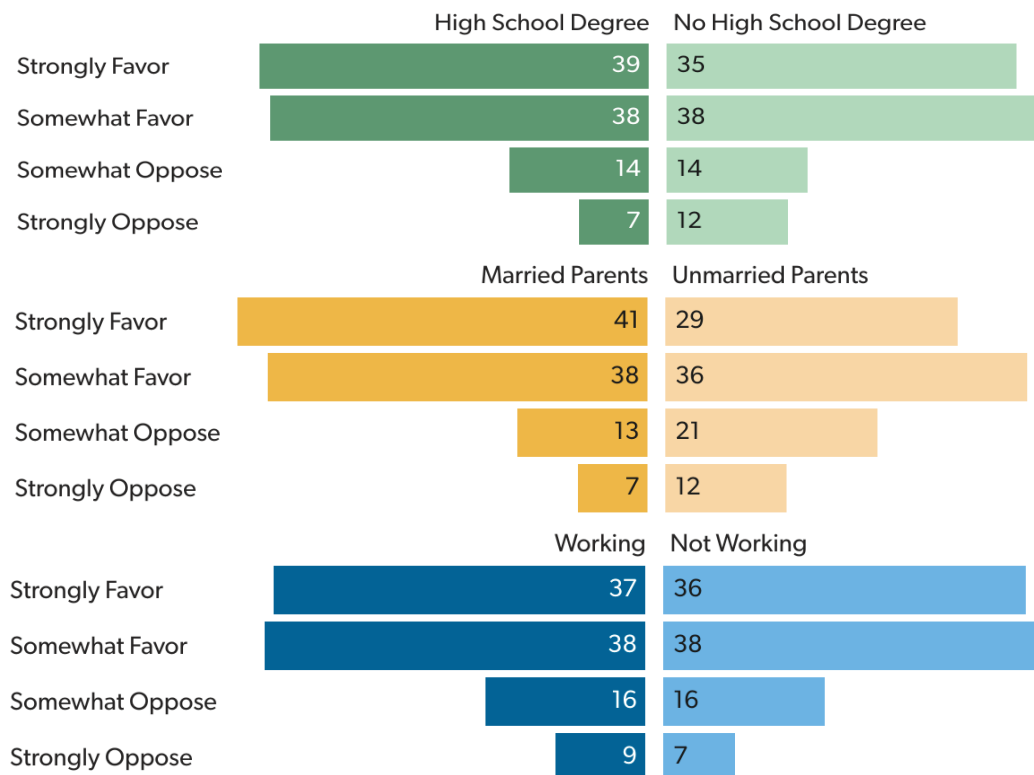
After exploring the support of these groups individually, I examine them as a whole, comparing those who are in some way distanced from adherence to the success sequence to those who have no information in the APS indicating they deviated from the success sequence. To be sure, this is a rough proxy for actual adherence to the success sequence, and results should thus be viewed with some caution. However, I do provide a look at meaningful differences as best I can with the available data.

Estimates of strong support for adults without a high school diploma are slightly below that of other adults, and strong opposition is slightly higher. However, these differences are not statistically significant.

Divides are larger between unmarried parents and all other adults. Unmarried parents are only 65 percent strongly or somewhat favorable toward teaching the success sequence, compared to 79 percent of married parents (Figure 7). For those with and without a high school degree and those working and not working, the favorability of the success sequence

Figure 7. Support for Teaching the Success Sequence by High School Degree, Parent Marital Status, and Working Status

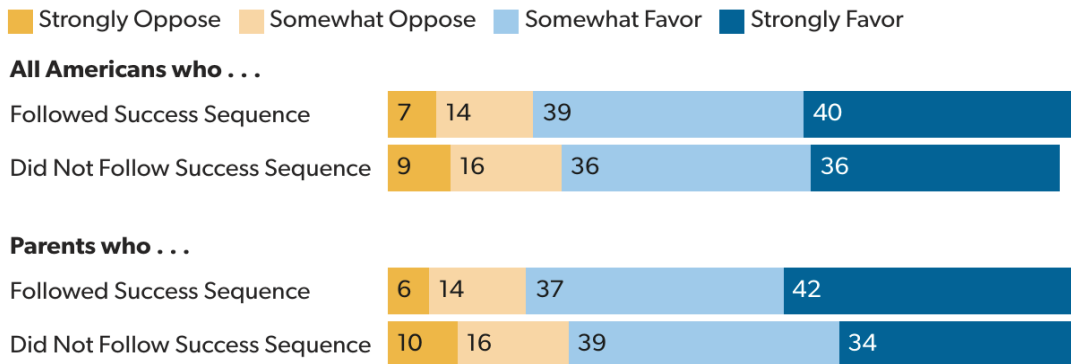
Percentage who favor or oppose teaching the success sequence in public schools



Note: In this figure, parents are those with a child under age 18. Retirees are not shown. Figure may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 2,625).
Source: American Perspectives Survey, August 2021.

Figure 8. Support for Teaching the Success Sequence by Success Sequence Adherence

Percentage who favor or oppose teaching the success sequence in public schools



Note: Figure may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 2,625). Source: American Perspectives Survey, August 2021.

does not significantly change. Based on current work status, 75 percent of those currently employed and 74 percent of those not currently working either somewhat or strongly support teaching the success sequence.¹²

Combining these into a single category of “non-adherents”—those who either never graduated from high school, had a child but were never married, or were not working and not retired—shows they have somewhat weaker support compared to respondents for whom I have no indication they

deviated from the success sequence, which I describe as “adherents.” Among all adults, the group of adherents showed greater support than non-adherents did (79 percent vs. 72 percent, respectively) (Figure 8). Among parents, the difference in net support was similar, but the difference among those showing strong support was somewhat more pronounced. Forty-two percent of parents who were adherents showed strong support, compared to 34 percent of non-adherents.

Figure 9. Support for Teaching Students About the Success Sequence by Income

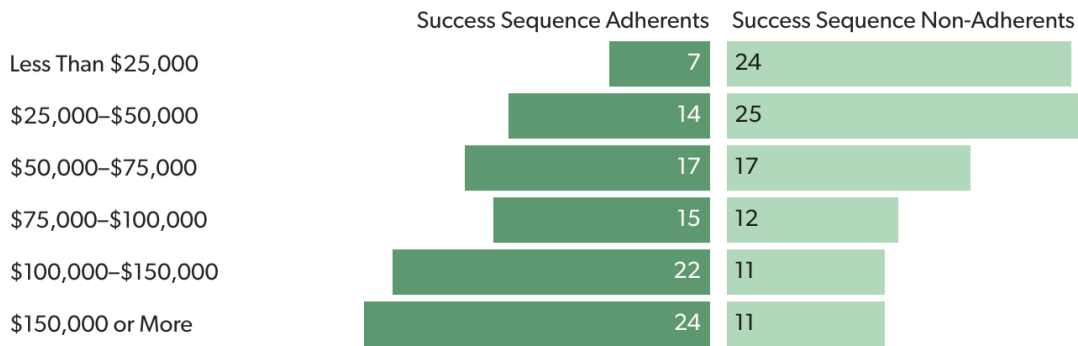
Percentage who support teaching the success sequence by annual income



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 2,625). Source: American Perspectives Survey, August 2021.

Figure 10. Income by Success Sequence Adherence

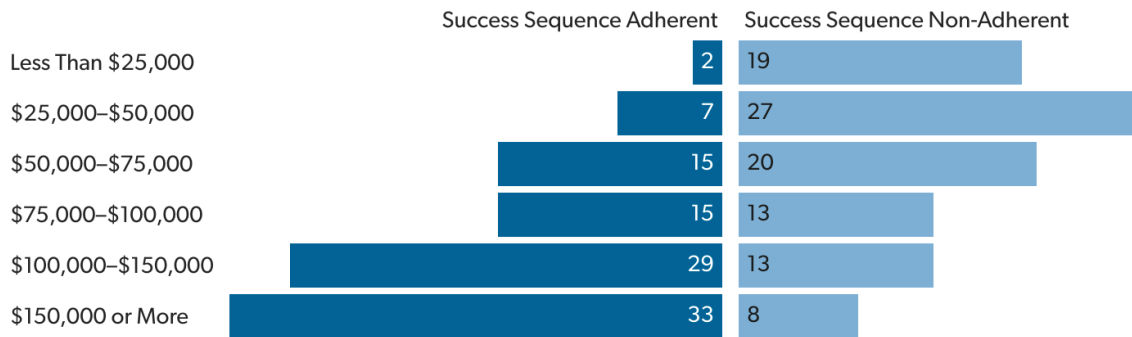
Percentage of all Americans with the following income levels by success sequence adherence



Note: Survey of US adults (N = 2,625).
Source: American Perspectives Survey, August 2021.

Figure 11. Parental Income by Success Sequence Adherence

Percentage of parents with the following income levels by success sequence adherence



Note: Figure may not add to 100 percent due to rounding. Survey of US adults (N = 2,625).
Source: American Perspectives Survey, August 2021.

Income Differences

A final set of comparisons, by household income, is worth making because the success sequence is offered as a path away from poverty. Across categories of income in Figure 9, minor differences show stronger net support (combining respondents who somewhat or strongly favored teaching the success sequence) among those with higher incomes. There is a similar pattern for parents, though with a smaller sample size, the difference across categories is not statistically significant.

With the data in hand for household income and the proxy for adherence to the success sequence, it's worth taking a final look at how incomes differ across those groups. For all adults, the differences displayed in Figure 10 are stark. Roughly 7 percent

of adherents had incomes of less than \$25,000 per year, and another 14 percent had incomes between \$25,000 and \$50,000. Among non-adherents, those percentages were 24 and 25 percent, respectively. At the top of the income range, 46 percent of adherents had incomes of above \$100,000 per year, more than double the 22 percent of non-adherents.

Among parents of school-age children, these differences were even greater (Figure 11). Just 2 percent of parents who were adherents earned less than \$25,000 per year, and another 7 percent had incomes between \$25,000 and \$50,000. Among parents who were non-adherents, those percentages were 19 and 27 percent, respectively. More adherents were at the top of the income range, with 29 percent earning between \$100,000 and

\$150,000 and another 33 percent earning more than \$150,000, compared to just 13 and 8 percent of non-adherents, respectively. For proponents of teaching the success sequence to students before they transition to adulthood, these patterns are clearly aligned with proponents' logic for doing so.

Conclusion

Across the nation, across adults and parents, and across a wide array of subgroups, including even those who have not followed it themselves, support for teaching the success sequence to students is strong. Of all the groups examined in this report, the ones with the weakest support still favor teaching the success sequence by a margin of two to one. Strong opinions both for and against also lean toward teaching the success sequence, with strong opposition never cresting above 14 percent for any group examined and strong support never falling below twice that proportion.

About the Author

Nat Malkus is a senior fellow and the deputy director of education policy at the American Enterprise Institute, where he specializes in empirical research on K–12 schooling.

Notes

1. Ron Haskins and Isabel V. Sawhill, *Creating an Opportunity Society* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2009).
2. Ron Haskins and Isabel V. Sawhill, "Work and Marriage: The Way to End Poverty and Welfare," Brookings Institution, September 2003, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/pb28.pdf>.
3. Wendy Wang and W. Bradford Wilcox, "The Millennial Success Sequence: Marriage, Kids, and the 'Success Sequence' Among Young Adults," American Enterprise Institute and Institute for Family Studies, June 14, 2017, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/working-paper/millennials-and-the-success-sequence-how-do-education-work-and-marriage-affect-poverty-and-financial-success-among-millennials/>.
4. Wang and Wilcox, "The Millennial Success Sequence."
5. Alysse ElHage and W. Bradford Wilcox, "Teach the 'Success Sequence' in Virginia Schools," Institute for Family Studies, November 18, 2021, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/teach-the-success-sequence-in-virginia-schools>; Ian Rowe, "Testimony: On Creating an Opportunity Society and Upward Mobility for People of All Races," Joint Economic Committee, May 12, 2021, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/testimony/testimony-on-creating-an-opportunity-society-and-upward-mobility-for-people-of-all-races/>; and Wendy Wang, "'The Sequence' Is the Secret to Success," *Wall Street Journal*, March 27, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-sequence-is-the-secret-to-success-1522189894>.
6. Brian Alexander, "What Is the 'Success Sequence' and Why Do So Many Conservatives Like It?," *Atlantic*, July 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/07/get-out-of-poverty-success-sequence/566414/>; and Michael D. Tanner, "The Success Sequence—and What It Leaves Out," Cato Institute, May 9, 2018, <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2018/05/09/michael-d-tanner/success-sequence-what-it-leaves-out/>.
7. Eve Tushnet, "What's Wrong with the 'Success Sequence,'" Institute for Family Studies, April 16, 2018, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/whats-wrong-with-the-success-sequence>; and Matt Bruenig, "The Success Sequence Is About Cultural Beefs, Not Poverty," People's Policy Project, August 5, 2017, <https://www.peoplespolicyproject.org/2017/08/05/the-success-sequence-is-about-cultural-beefs-not-poverty/>.

This level of support should not necessarily undermine thoughtful critiques of whether the success sequence is a causal path out of poverty, whether public policies that promote it will be successful, or how it should be taught in schools. Popular support, especially measured among respondents who quickly respond to a brief definition, should not supplant thoughtful application of these concepts to promote the good of citizens, particularly students.

However, as contests flare across the country over what is, and what should be, taught in schools, the fact that support for the success sequence is strong on all sides of the many divisions that divide us—race, politics, generation, education, and gender—puts substantial weight behind the prospect of teaching that those who graduate high school, obtain full-time work, and get married before parenthood will likely avoid poverty has a place in schools.

8. Bruenig, “The Success Sequence Is About Cultural Beefs, Not Poverty”; and Michael D. Tanner, “The Success Sequence: Normative or Descriptive?,” Cato Institute, May 15, 2018, <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2018/05/15/michael-d-tanner/success-sequence-normative-or-descriptive/>.
9. Jordan Weissmann, “For Black Families, Doing Everything ‘Right’ Isn’t Always Enough,” *Slate*, August 6, 2015, <https://slate.com/business/2015/08/the-success-sequence-and-race-black-families-who-do-everything-right-still-don-t-end-up-middle-class.html>; and Richard V. Reeves, Edward Rodrigue, and Alex Gold, “Following the Success Sequence? Success Is More Likely If You’re White.,” Brookings Institution, August 6, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/following-the-success-sequence-success-is-more-likely-if-youre-white/>.
10. Isabel V. Sawhill, “Why Does the Success Sequence Work?,” Cato Institute, May 11, 2018, <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2018/05/11/isabel-v-sawhill/why-does-success-sequence-work/>.
11. Daniel A. Cox and Nat Malkus, “Controversy and Consensus: Perspectives on Race, Religion, and COVID-19 in Public Schools,” AEI Survey Center on American Life, September 22, 2021, <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/august-2021-aps/>.
12. Data on retired respondents are not shown.

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