



FROM THE DESK OF JEANNE ALLEN

TO: Education Reporters
DATE: August 16, 2011
RE: The PDK/Gallup Poll: A Call for Facts

“Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts.” — Daniel Patrick Moynihan

At the heart of the PDK/Gallup Poll again this year is one principal theme that underscores the words of the late Senator Moynihan. In nearly every instance, data, facts or complete context is not offered in exchange for the opinions sought.

From questions about unions' impact on educational quality, to whether online learning works, the questions seem determined to elicit feelings and sentimentalities more than thoughtful responses.

For example — pollsters ask:

Most teachers in the nation now belong to unions or associations that bargain over salaries, working conditions, and the like. Has unionization, in your opinion, helped, hurt, or made no difference in the quality of public school education in the United States?

Pollsters never inquire whether the respondent understands what unionization does in schooling. Their question is disconnected from **union**-supported protections relating to seniority, or performance pay, or pensions and benefits. Saying “most teachers belong to unions” ignores the fact that most have no choice in the matter.

The public allegedly supports more technology use in schools but opposes **online** learning. In reality, the poll does little to define it, inferring that such a notion is about learning at home, rather than learning in a fully integrated online environment supported by professionals.

Time and time again, PDK has asked the public about **charter** schools, **vouchers**, teacher pay, and the quality of their own schools, without baseline data offered that can help them gauge knowledge and then opinion. Perhaps unwittingly, PDK and Gallup reinforce the notion that information really doesn't matter. Is there any wonder we have an education gap?

The report's authors appreciate that the primary theme of 2011 has been teachers, unions and the issues that tie them together. With the media exposing the public to an aspect of public education rarely seen, and governors and a president who have challenged union power, tenure and seniority protections in their policymaking, it's no wonder that even this flawed survey finds that nearly half of all Americans believe unions do more harm than good. The numbers might well be larger had questions provided more definition. Even Gallup acknowledges, “...question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.”

For 18 years, The Center of Education Reform has conducted or researched polls on the issue of education. Each time, these surveys, return dramatically different results than PDK/Gallup. That's because without additional context and information, we can simply speak to our own, personal experience. For most of us that feels and looks good, even if the achievement of students in this

country tells a vastly different story. The following data gives additional insights into the well-intentioned but flawed PDK annual report. It's provided as a guide to the media, as well as a call for balance.

What the PDK Gallup Poll Really Says

Teachers: There's nothing "shocking" about people's perceptions of teachers — we love them. They make us feel good. We know they take our kids everyday. Most people would be happy if their child became a teacher. That's not the point. It's what we do when some teachers are not able to do the job they were hired to do. It's not personal, it's business.

Compensation: Clearly biased against the notion of performance pay, most people polled do not support it, most likely because only standardized tests are mentioned as the basis for the evaluation, ignoring the whole menu of value added gains, skills, and other evaluations at play in most performance pay efforts.

Charter schools: While support for charter schools is at an all time high, it only tells us one thing, reinforced by our own data-drive polling: that to know charters is to love them. The more people are exposed to charter schools — and a real definition of what a charter school actually is — the more they favor the idea of public charter schools as an option for parents and students.

Vouchers: Choosing a private school at public expense is not only poorly received, but of course, it is poorly worded, and a fictitious scenario. Parental choice dictates where the monies allocated for one's education go and unless those parents can't be considered part of the public, their rights are not an expense to anyone but the school that loses their funds, presumably for failing to meet their needs. More to the point, support for school vouchers has been polling at increased levels and as a result, 18 school choice programs were adopted in states this year alone. Numerous polls from Zogby International, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies and several daily newspapers show that more than a majority of Americans support school choice.

Money: The generic question "What do you think are the biggest problems that the public schools of your community must deal with?" resulted in 36 percent of people saying that not enough money is the problem. The media continually discussing America's debt, hearing about layoffs locally and nationally or lack of job market is probably feeding into that percentage – up from 24 percent in 2006. No mention is made of how much money is currently spent, however, so opinions are asked — and given — with little regard for baseline data.

Standards: Ask a friend or neighbor which they like better — freedom or prescribed ways of doing things. Invariably, they will pick the former. So the conclusion that most people do not want teachers being told what to do is not really valid. There is so much more behind the issue of what is taught, measured and expected (*and this coming from a group known for opposing top down controls!*)

The President: President Obama received higher grades for his performance in supporting public schools. 41 percent gave him an A or B, up from 34 percent last year. What they define as supporting public schools is probably worth asking next time.

###

Thank you for taking time to review our work. Please call me at (800) 521-2118, if I can help you better understand the CER analysis of the *2011 PDK and Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*.

The Center for Education Reform

910 Seventeenth Street, NW • Suite 1100 • Washington, DC 20006

800-521-2118 • 301-986-8088

www.edreform.com