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STILL ON THIN ICE?

A Look at Recent Polls on School Choice and Charter Schools

Last November, a national survey found that most Americans were unfamiliar with school choice and charter school programs. That survey, conducted by the Public Agenda Foundation, found that "It isn't that people are undecided as much as that they are unaware. The vast majority of the public knows very little about school vouchers, charter schools or for-profit schools.... Despite their lack of knowledge and mixed reactions to vouchers and charter schools, people are hardly endorsing the status quo. They have serious concerns about the public schools, even those in their own communities.... Public frustration runs high, especially when it comes to school management and the slowness of reform. At this time, the public — more pragmatic than ideological in this domain — seems to be keeping its options open."

With the annual poll season about to begin amidst the Back-to-School and election flurry, the Center for Education Reform has reviewed major polls both nationally and in the states about these issues. The conclusions are for you to draw, but the important fact to remember about these polls and those that are about to be unleashed on the American people is that what it appears that the public believes is often seriously affected by what is asked. Words and combinations of words have different means to different individuals.

School Vouchers

Vouchers involve giving parents the choice to send their children to private or parochial schools by providing them with a stipend equivalent to the average of what the state pays to educate a student in a public school. Voucher, or 'opportunity scholarship,' programs are currently in place in Milwaukee, Cleveland and Florida. Because it is such a controversial topic in education today, more polls can be found on vouchers than most other reform issues. Here is a sampling of survey outcomes beginning in 1996.

1996

- 59 percent of the general population favors a system of giving parents government-funded vouchers to pay for tuition at the public, private or religious school of their choice. (1996, US News & World Report)

1997

- 82 percent of the general population supports providing parents with the option of sending their children to the school of their choice - either public, private or parochial - rather than the school to which they are assigned. (1997 National Survey of Americans' Attitudes Toward Education and School Reform, The Center for Education Reform/International Communications Research)

- In **Utah**, 79 percent favored school choice. (1997, Utah Coalition for Freedom in Education/R.T. Nielson)
- 61 percent of the general population favor giving parents education tax credits or vouchers to pay for their children's tuition at the public or private school of their choice. (1997 National Monitor Survey, American Viewpoint, Inc.)
- In **Minnesota**, 72 percent favored giving tax credits and deductions to help finance private education. (April 1997, Star Tribune/Minnesota Poll)

1998

- 56 percent of parents favor a proposal that would allow students to attend any public, private, or religious school they choose with the government paying for part or all of the tuition. (1998 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll)
- In **Wisconsin**, 60 percent favored vouchers (Dec 1998, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Institute for Survey and Policy Research/Wisconsin Poll)
- In **Arizona**, 65 percent of parents favored vouchers (1998 Public Opinion on Educational Issues in Arizona, The Goldwater Institute/Center for Market-Based Education)

1999

- 92 percent of parents agree that they should have the right to choose the school they want their child to attend. (79 percent strongly agreed; 13 percent somewhat agreed). (1999, *On Thin Ice: How Advocates and Opponents Could Misread the Public's Views on Vouchers and Charter Schools*, Public Agenda)
- 53 percent of the general population and 60 percent of the black population support a voucher system where parents would get money from the government to send their children to the public, private or parochial school of their choice. (1999 National Opinion Poll - Education, Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies/Smith-Richardson Foundation)
- 57 percent of the general population favor the idea of parents being given a voucher or certificate from the government to pay for all or part of tuition if they decide to send their children to a private or parochial school (29 percent strongly favored; 28 percent somewhat favored). (1999, *On Thin Ice*, Public Agenda)
- 70 percent of the general population would seriously consider or definitely use a voucher to send their child to a private school (23 percent would definitely, 47 percent would seriously consider). (1999, *On Thin Ice*, Public Agenda)

Charter Schools

Charter schools are public schools started by teachers, parents and/or community groups that exist free from government regulations except for issues of health, safety and discrimination. The first charter school was born in 1993 and, in the seven years since, approximately 1,700 more have been started in many states across the country. Below are results of surveys on charter schools from 1997 to 1999.

1997

- 55 percent of the general population favors charter schools, which are explained as public schools which are started by either teachers, parents and/or community groups, are freed from regulations except health, safety and discrimination, and are open to parents by choice. (1997 National Survey of Americans' Attitudes Toward Education and School Reform, The Center for Education Reform/International Communications Research)
- In New York , 64.5 percent favored creating charter schools (1997, Empire Foundation/Zogby International)

1999

- 62 percent of the general population and 65 percent of parents favor the charter school program that exempts some public schools from certain state regulations and permits them to function independently from the local school district as long as they meet state standards for student achievement. (1999, NPR/Kaiser/Kennedy School Educational Survey)
- 68 percent of the general population favors the idea of charter schools, which are explained as public schools that have a lot more control over their own budget, staff and curriculum, and are free from many existing regulations (35 percent strongly favor; 33 percent somewhat favor) (1999, *On Thin Ice*, Public Agenda)
- In Michigan, 73 percent favored charter schools. (November 24, 1999, *Detroit News CyberSurvey*)
- 55 percent of the general population, 65 percent of Generation X'ers and 67 percent of 'wired workers' would consider sending their child to a charter school. (1999, Penn, Schoen and Berland)

Conclusion

As the numbers show, Americans are asking for school reform. The popularity of alternatives to traditional public schools only increases as time goes on, proving reform to be more than a phase or a short-lived phenomenon. With the American educational system deteriorating daily, parents and concerned citizens are finally letting their voices be heard. Those voices are calling for choice.

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