



Americans Want Choice, Not Government Mandates

By: Jason Bedrick
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Americans support educational choice but are skeptical of Common Core and test-based accountability, according to the results of the national survey on education policy that the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice released yesterday.

Only 13 percent of Americans said that education was the most important issue facing the country, putting it third behind health care (16 percent) and the economy and jobs (38 percent). Americans have a dim view of the direction our education system is going. Nearly six out of ten said that K-12 education in America is on the “wrong track” compared with only one-third who said it is going the “right direction.”

Americans clearly prefer private schools to public schools. Excluding respondents who did not answer, only 45 percent of respondents gave an “A” or a “B” to their local public school compared with 78 percent who gave the highest two marks to their local private schools. When asked where they would prefer to send their child if they “could select any type of school,” only 37 percent chose a public school while 40 percent chose a private school, 10 percent chose a charter school, and 11 percent preferred to homeschool.

It’s no wonder then that Americans want more choices. The most popular private educational choice program was the scholarship tax credit (STC). As the survey prompt explained, an STC program “gives tax credits to individuals and businesses if they contribute money to nonprofit organizations that distribute private scholarships” thereby giving parents “the option of sending their child to the school of their choice,” including private religious or secular schools. Nearly two-thirds of respondents supported them while only one in four were opposed. Support for STCs was even higher among respondents who were parents of school-aged children (67 percent), low-income (67 percent), black (72 percent) or Hispanic (80 percent). These results are similar to the 2012 Education Next survey, which also found that STCs are the most popular form of educational choice with 72 percent in favor.

When asked about “school vouchers” without any definition provided, 43 percent of respondents supported them while 21 percent opposed them. When first explaining that a “school voucher system allows parents the option of sending their child to the school of their choice, whether that school is public or private, including both religious and non-religious schools” using “tax dollars

currently allocated to a school district,” support increased to 63 percent and opposition increased to 33 percent. Low-income, black, and Hispanic respondents were even more favorable with between 72 and 74 percent supporting vouchers.

Education savings accounts were more popular than vouchers (without a prompt) but not as popular as tax-credit scholarships, with 56 percent supporting them and 34 percent opposing them. School parents were more favorable (62 percent), as were respondents who were low-income (64 percent), black (68 percent), and Hispanic (68 percent).

By contrast, Americans are more skeptical of government mandates like the Common Core State Standards. Recent surveys have shown that nearly half of Americans are not familiar with Common Core, so how the survey question is asked matters a great deal. As my Cato Institute colleague Neal McCluskey has observed, when the survey question describes Common Core in glowing terms while omitting the federal government’s involvement, support will tend to be quite high. The Friedman survey offers what is likely the fairest question yet asked in a major survey:

The objective of the Common Core State Standards Initiative is to establish similar academic standards and comparable tests across all states for students in grades K-12. The standards were initially developed by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers. States and districts have adopted the common standards and tests in association with the U.S. Department of Education incentives. In general, do you favor or oppose the “Common Core”?

The survey found that 50 percent supported Common Core when given that prompt versus 41 percent who opposed it. That’s a lot closer than the WSJ/NBC poll, which found 59 percent support and 31 percent opposition when presenting a positive description that omitted mention of the federal government. However, parents of school-aged children opposed Common Core 49 percent to 44 percent in the Friedman survey.

Moreover, as McCluskey noted, even the Friedman survey downplays the extent of federal involvement in pushing Common Core. That’s no small matter, since the Friedman survey also finds that Americans are especially skeptical of the federal government’s role in education. Three out of four respondents rated the federal government’s handling of K-12 education “fair” or “poor” compared to only 22 percent who rated it “good” or “excellent.”

American parents are skeptical of test-based accountability in general. More than half of parents of school-aged children say that 16 or more school days are dedicated to test activities each year and 44 percent believe this is “too high,” which is double the number who say it is “too low.” One third believe it’s “about right.”

The Friedman survey reveals that parents want more choices in education, not more government mandates. Not surprisingly, low-income and minority families who currently have the fewest educational options express the most support for educational choice initiatives. Parents recognize that educational excellence cannot be engineered from above. Instead, parents want to be empowered to make the educational choices that work best for their children.

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