



Teachers Union Poll Is Not Credible

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Yesterday, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) released the results of a poll conducted by a Democratic polling firm supposedly showing that American parents don't support a plethora of education reforms, including school choice, and would rather increase funding for public schools. A closer examination reveals that some of the AFT's poll questions were designed to push respondents into giving the answers that the AFT wanted, which is why their results are so different from previous polls from more credible organizations.

Here's an example of how the AFT phrased their questions:

With which approach for improving education do you agree more?

APPROACH A) We should focus on ensuring that every child has access to a good public school in their community. We need to make the investments needed to ensure all schools provide safe conditions, an enriching curriculum, support for students' social and emotional development, and effective teachers.

APPROACH B) We should open more public charter schools and provide more vouchers that allow parents to send their children to private schools at public expense. Children will receive the best education if we give families the financial freedom to attend schools that meet their needs.

It's no surprise that 77 percent agreed with the first approach and only 20 percent agreed with the second. Either "invest" in "good" public schools in your "community" and receive all sort of wonderful goodies ("enriching curriculum!" "effective teachers!") or forgo all that so that some parents can send their kids to private school "at public expense." Aside from the fact that this is a false choice (competition can actually improve public school performance and school choice programs can save money), the wording is blatantly designed to push respondents toward Approach A.

But what if we rewrote those options?

APPROACH A) We should focus on ensuring that every child has access to a good public school in their community. Children will receive the best education if the public invests in better public school safety, curriculum, support services, and teachers.

APPROACH B) We should focus on ensuring that every child has access to good public charter schools and private schools in their community. Children will receive the best education if the public invests in giving families the financial freedom to choose the schools that meet their needs.

This question is clearly more fair than the AFT poll's since it employs similar wording in each answer. If we wanted to push respondents toward Approach B, we could replace "invests" with "at the public expense" and employ additional shenanigans like the AFT poll did (e.g. – "choose the schools with the most enriching curriculum and most effective teachers").

Fortunately, we don't have to imagine how the public would respond to fairly-worded questions. Harvard University's Program on Education and Governance conducts an annual survey of the public's views on education policy that meets the highest standards for fairness and rigor. The survey eschews language designed to push respondents in a certain direction and often asks the same question with multiple wordings. According to the 2012 Harvard poll:

- 54% of parents favor giving *all* families a "wider choice" to "enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition" compared with 21% opposed.
- 46% of parents favor giving *low-income* families a "wider choice" to "enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition" compared with 21% opposed.
- When not given a neutral option, 50% of parents favor giving *low-income* families a "wider choice" to "enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition" compared with 50% opposed.
- When the question omits the words "a wider choice" and only asks about using "government funds to pay the tuition of low-income students who choose to attend private schools," 44% of parents are in favor with 32% opposed.

Note that while support fluctuates depending on the wording, no matter how Harvard asked the question there was still more support among parents for school choice than opposition.

Moreover, when asking about scholarship tax credits instead of vouchers, the support was even higher:

- 57% of parents supported "a tax credit for individual and corporate donations that pay for scholarships to help low-income parents send their children to private schools" compared with 16% opposed.
- When not given a neutral option, 73% of parents supported "a tax credit for individual and corporate donations that pay for scholarships to help low-income parents send their children to private schools" compared with 27% opposed.

The AFT's poll results only look so different from Harvard's because their poll was designed to reflect what the AFT wanted to hear rather than what the public really believes.