



The ups and downs of public opinion on school choice

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The more people understand about school choice, the more they like it.

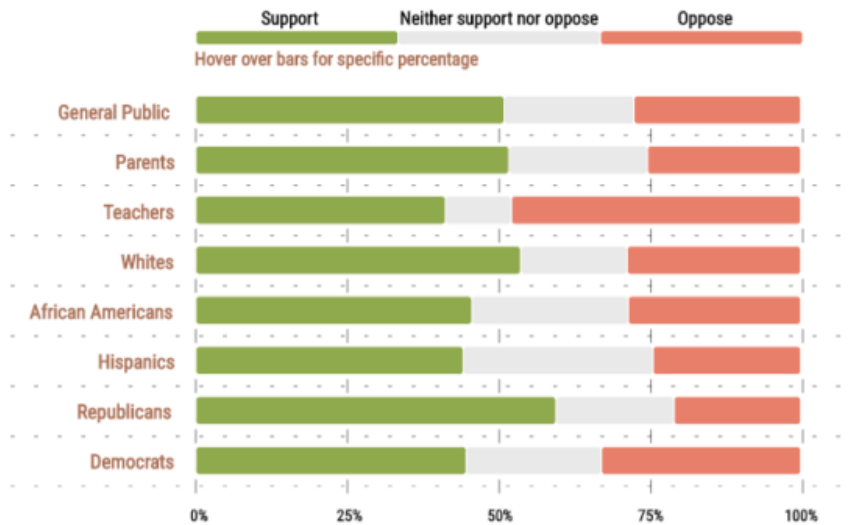
2016 EducationNext Poll asked more than 4,000 respondents, including 609 teachers, how they feel about charter schools, private school vouchers and tax credit scholarships, among other education-related topics. The poll has demonstrated that more respondents favor school choice measures when provided with a definition of what they mean.

But while school choice has made promising gains among Democrats and minorities, Republicans and white demographic groups not utilizing choice as much are showing less interest.

The most expansive school choice program is just the second most popular.

Charter schools today serve more than 3 million children in 43 states and the District of Columbia. Public support of charter schools has remained at 51 percent since last year's EdNext poll. Support is lower when respondents are asked their position without a definition of charter schools.

As you may know, many states permit the formation of charter schools, which are publicly funded but are not managed by the local school board. These schools are expected to meet promised objectives, but are exempt from many state regulations. Do you support or oppose the formation of charter schools?



“Unless you give the respondents some kind of a context, they’re not going to know what that charter school is,” Paul Peterson, one of the EdNext poll authors, said at a panel discussion Friday on the poll’s results. “We’ve found in previous surveys that a lot of people have misperceptions of what a charter school is. Some people think they teach religion at charter schools. Other people think they exclude people from applying to charter schools.”

African Americans, who largely benefit from charter schools in cities like Washington, D.C., increased their support slightly but still trail white in their level of support.

Similarly, the gap between political parties persists but is getting smaller. Since last year, Democrats’ support for charter schools has increased while Republican support has slipped.

Nina Rees, president and CEO of the [National Alliance for Public Charter Schools](#), said at the panel that positive opinion can partially reflect the attitudes of the people who have had access to charter schools in the last 25 years.

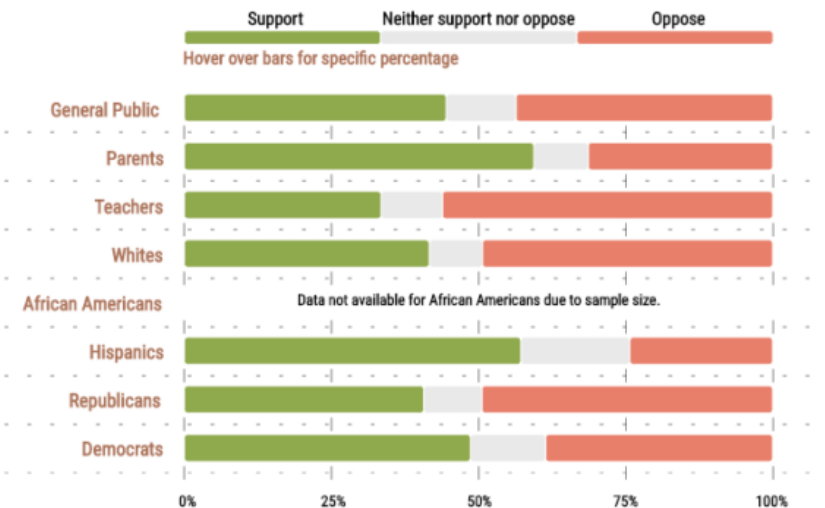
“Most of our students and most of our political base is in inner cities,” said Rees at the panel discussion. “In order for us to really be able to expand, we do need to branch out into middle and upper-income neighborhoods. Once you have these charter schools in those neighborhoods ... then you see a very different dynamic when it comes to defending and seeking to expand charter schools.”

Public opinion of private-school vouchers is not faring as well.

Fewer public respondents have favored both universal and low-income vouchers since last year. The poll finds that even less support vouchers when the question is phrased with an emphasis on government funding.

Although the 10 current state voucher programs have income limits, universal vouchers received more public support — 45 percent — than low-income vouchers — 37 percent.

A proposal has been made that would give all families with children in public schools a wider choice, by allowing them to enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition. Would you favor or oppose this proposal?



Unlike charter schools, vouchers are preferred more by minority respondents than whites. Just 28 percent of white people favored low-income vouchers compared to 54 percent of Hispanics. The poll did not have enough data on African Americans to make an assessment.

“Clearly universality gets more popular support. I think that’s sort of natural when people feel like they are all potentially going to benefit from a policy, they are likely to support it,” said Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom, at the panel discussion.

In another contrast with the charter school results, Democrats surpass Republicans in favoring both universal and low-income student vouchers.

“In the cities, where we have a disproportionate number of low-income families of color, we’ve had schools that have been under-performing for a long time. So it’s not a surprise to me at all that we see significant majorities of low-income families of color that want alternatives,” said Shavar Jeffries, president of Democrats for Education Reform, at the panel discussion.

On the Republican side, experts say that people who don’t need school choice may not favor it. “Republicans tend to have chosen districts by choosing houses and they’re happy with the public schools they have,” said Peterson.

Tax credit scholarships, available in 16 states, are less prevalent but more popular than any other school choice program. Yet support for the programs fell from 55 to 53 percent.

As with vouchers, African American and Hispanic support for tax credit scholarships is higher than whites’.

McCluskey notes that about 230,000 students attended private school with a tax credit scholarship last year, compared with 150,000 using vouchers.

“With the tax credits, everybody feels that they may get some benefit out of it,” he said.

The respondents’ opinion of school choice in part stems from low opinions of local public schools, and an even lower opinion of public schools nationwide.

In a slight increase from last year, 14 percent of all respondents graded their local public schools with an “A.” At least half of every demographic group except African Americans graded local schools with an “A” or “B,” a percentage that remains unchanged from the year before.

EdNext has administered the poll since 2007.