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Poll: Public Opposes Greater Federal Control of Education

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A majority of Americans do not want federal bureaucrats seizing the education reins from the states, according to the latest [Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll](#) on public attitudes toward education. The poll also found widespread public anxiety about school funding, as state and local governments continue to struggle with budget shortfalls.

Phi Delta Kappa executive director William Bushaw said the annual survey, now in its 42nd year, clearly shows Americans believe proper authority over education "resides within state governments," and not in Washington, DC.

Two-thirds of U.S. adults surveyed said state and local governments should have the lead role in setting education policy. At the same time, however, four out of five adults surveyed said local school boards should not set education standards.

The poll also found public support for President Obama's education agenda is dropping. Just 34 percent of respondents gave Obama's education policies a grade of A or B, down from 45 percent in 2009.

Insufficient Funds Highlighted

Bushaw also highlighted public worries about insufficient funding for local schools, which he said had been growing "since the start of the millennium." Of the public's concerns for public schools, 36 percent of U.S. adults ranked funding first, followed by poor discipline and school overcrowding.

The 2010 poll reiterated earlier findings that most Americans think positively about their local schools, but give low grades to the nation's public schools generally.

About half of the poll's respondents gave their community's schools a grade of A or B, an outcome virtually unchanged since 2005. At the same time, the percentage of respondents giving high marks to public schools nationally dipped from 20 percent to 18 percent.

Dan Domenech, executive director of the American Association School Administrators, said the high grades for local schools were "very much contrary" to the grades Americans gave the nation's schools overall.

Domenech noted evidence that dissatisfaction with local school might also be growing. At the same time the percentage giving top grades inched up, the percentage of U.S. adults who graded their local public schools with a C, D, or F also rose from 43 to 49 percent. A seven-point drop in respondents who answered "I don't know" allowed the favorable and poor grades to rise, Domenech explained.

Public Backs Merit Pay

Another key finding of the 2010 poll showed substantial public support for teacher merit pay, which teacher unions vehemently oppose.

Seven in 10 Americans say teachers should be paid "on the basis of his or her work," with 72 percent of parents with children in public schools supporting the idea. The poll also found a sharp increase in support for tying teacher pay to student achievement, with 73 percent of respondents saying pay should be "somewhat" or "very closely tied" to test scores, up from 60 percent in 2000.

School Choice Absent

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OUR FEATURED EXPERT



Robert Holland, an award-winning journalist and author who has championed school choice throughout his career, is a Heartland Institute Senior Fellow addressing education policy. His book on teacher preparation, *To Build a Better Teacher: The Emergence of a Competitive Education Industry*, was published by Praeger

Paperbacks in 2004

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Missing from the survey were any questions about private school choice. But the survey did reveal greater public support for charter schools, which public schools run independently and often free from most state regulations. Nearly seven in 10 respondents this year said they favored charter schools, up from 42 percent in 2000.

Asked why the poll did not include questions about support for private school choice, Bushaw said that those questions haven't been asked "in about three years."

Jeanne Allen, president of the Center for Education Reform in Washington, DC, said the absence of controversial questions about school choice should be seen as an asset rather than a liability.

"There's little doubt that PDK removed any questions about private school choice because those questions caused enormous controversy and tainted the PDK poll's validity," Allen said. "The questions were poorly worded and misleading, helping PDK get the results they wanted to fit their positive narrative about the quality of public schools."

Although Allen says the 2010 poll is an improvement over previous years, she criticized the use of vignettes from teachers union leaders and other education establishment voices. "You get the impression that PDK isn't trying to produce a public opinion survey, but a glossy advocacy piece," she said.

Neal McCluskey (nmcccluskey@cato.org) is associate director of the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.

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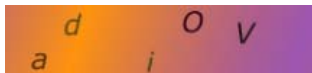
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