

what the public really wants on education

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Back to School Edition!

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There is broad agreement across the political spectrum that the public school system needs to be reformed to meet the challenges of the 21st century. The question is: How?

Specific education reform proposals vary widely. Some argue that more money and resources are key. Others say that more money would be wasted. Their answer: policy provisions to enforce and maintain high academic standards, with sanctions for poorly-performing schools. Still others contend reform is doomed to fail unless market pressures are introduced into the system through the provision of vouchers to attend private schools.

This debate is intense, particularly after several years of experience with the successes and failures of the bipartisan No Child Left Behind Act, which enacted into law strict educational standards, mandatory testing, and (at least in theory) more federal funding of public education. The various protagonists in this debate naturally claim public support for their positions, yet a comprehensive survey of public opinion polls shows that the public's ideas for reform do not fit neatly into any of the camps in this debate.

Despite criticisms of its current performance, the public's views on educational reform start with strong support of the public school system—particularly as it functions for low-income students. The public wants that performance improved, starting with higher standards, and is willing to tolerate fairly strict guidelines and testing regimes to accomplish this goal.

But the public recognizes that these tougher standards need to be tempered with flexibility. And the public believes the quest for educational excellence means that more money has to be spent on public schools—to reduce class size, attract better teachers, modernize school infrastructure, provide more preschool and afterschool programs, and help lagging schools meet NCLB requirements.

The data also indicate that the public is far more interested in implementing more accountability in public schools and in providing more resources to the public school system than in moving to a voucher-based system. Indeed, vouchers tend to lose badly today as political propositions precisely because they are perceived to be in conflict with the public's commitment to adequate resources for public schools.

The more policymakers understand these nuanced views of the public on education reform, the easier it will become to build public support for a strong reform agenda. What the Public Really Wants on Education, our latest monthly analysis of U.S. public opinion polls, seeks to provide that understanding.

General Views of the Public School System

Let's start with the public's views of the schools their own children actually attend. In the 2006 Phi Delta Kappa (PDK)/Gallup poll, an annual benchmark survey on public opinion and education, 64 percent give the public school their eldest child attends an "A" or a "B."

Yet the public rates the nation's schools as a whole much more poorly. In the same poll, only 21 percent of the public gave the nation's schools an A or B. Sixty-eight percent assigned them a grade of C or lower.

Why this dramatic difference? How can people rate the nation's public schools so poorly and their own children's schools so highly? Well, even allowing for considerable bias, people just don't have a sense of crisis about their local public schools—reflecting fairly positive personal experiences with them—that they have about the national system.

The public reads, for example, about truly dysfunctional schools elsewhere—inner-city public schools would be the most common example—and consider this a very serious problem. So when they rate the nation's public schools poorly, they may be expressing a sincere judgment about schools' failure to lift a substantial and disadvantaged proportion of society, and not just transferring their own personal dissatisfaction onto a national target.

This contradicts a common picture of the typical American as narrowly self-interested and unconcerned with the collective welfare, but there is plenty of precedent for this view in scholarly literature. Some support for this interpretation is provided by data from a 2004 Hart-Teeter Educational Testing Service (ETS) poll. In separate questions, respondents were asked about the quality of their schools in high-income, middle-income, and low-income neighborhoods.

Sixty-seven percent of the public rated schools in high-income areas "excellent" or "good," 82 percent of the public thought schools in middle-income areas were "good" or "fair," and 60 percent thought schools in low-income areas were "inadequate" or "in crisis." Another 23 percent rated schools in low-income neighborhoods as "fair," and just 9 percent thought there were "good" or "excellent."

The public's views of schools in these different areas align pretty closely to what we know about school performance in areas with different income levels. This finding strongly suggests that overall perception of poor performance of the nation's schools is driven by perceptions of failing performance in low-income neighborhoods. Conversely, the public's positive assessment of schools in their own areas probably reflects the fact the most parents live in middle or high income areas, where the schools are actually pretty good (if in need of some improvement; keep in mind that the most common grade assigned for one's children's school is "B" not "A" and there are about as many "C"s assigned as "A"s).

Report Card for Schools

64 percent give the public school their eldest child attends an **A** or a **B**

21 percent of the public gave the nation's schools an **A** or **B**

68 percent assigned a grade of **C** or lower to the nation's schools

(Phi Delta Kappa / Gallup)

Consistent with these relatively positive personal experiences, support for the institution of public schools remains very strong. In the 2006 Gallup/PDK poll, 71 percent said we should concentrate on reforming the existing public school system; only 24 percent said we should focus on finding an alternative system. Similarly, in the 2002 Gallup/PDK poll, 69 percent of the public said they would prefer a plan that improved and strengthened the existing public schools, compared to only 29 percent who believed a plan for providing vouchers would be better.

Other data reinforce these findings. In a June 1999 Penn, Schoen and Berland/Democratic Leadership Council (PSB/DLC) poll, 71 percent endorsed the use of all available resources to improve public schools, compared to just 24 percent who preferred helping people go to private schools. Even more impressive, a staggering 98 percent say they favor continuing the guarantee of a free public education, and 96 percent say it's important that public schools be strengthened, according to a 1998 Peter Harris/Recruiting New Teachers (RNT) poll.

Thus general support for reforming and strengthening public schools seems quite strong. But just what kind of reform does the public have in mind? This is a vast subject, yet analysis of the data indicates the answer can be boiled down to two words: accountability and resources.

More Accountability

Possibly the clearest public preference about school reform is the desire for more accountability. In the 2004 ETS poll, 80 percent said “we need greater accountability when it comes to public schools.” Support for accountability includes support for higher standards and a willingness to tolerate fairly strict guidelines and testing regimes to accomplish this goal.

There is evidence that support for standards is substantially higher today than in the past. For example, a question dating back to the late 1950's asked people whether students should have to pass a standard nationwide academic examination to graduate from high school.

The public split fairly evenly on the question through the mid-1960's, but by the mid-1970s (the next time the question was asked) a strong consensus had evolved. By more than two-to-one, people favored having a examination before graduation. That support continues to

Setting the Standards

71 percent of the public endorses a voluntary national program to measure the performance of public schools by testing fourth- and eighth-graders (1998 Gallup/PDK poll)

69 percent support a single, agreed upon set of national standards (1999 PSB/DLC)

94 percent support making students meet adequate academic standards to be promoted or graduate (1999 National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation)

87 percent support using standardized tests to ensure that students meet national academic standards (1999 National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation)

the present day and, if anything, is becoming more lop-sided.

In a 2000 Business Roundtable poll, 70 percent of the public backed statewide graduation tests for high school, even for students who had passing grades in all their classes. And in a 2006 Hart-Winston poll for ETS, 81 percent favored requiring students to pass statewide graduation tests ensuring they have mastered the core subject areas.

Nationwide and statewide examinations for high school graduates are a specific and limited idea, but other polling data shows that the public has developed a broad and strong interest in the concept of testing standards. Gallup, for example, asked one form or another of a general question about using standardized national tests to measure and compare local student achievement from 1970 to 1992. Support never dropped below 69 percent.

Polls taken later in the 1990s tell the same story. The 1998 Gallup/PDK poll found 71 percent of the public endorsed a voluntary national program (as proposed by the Clinton administration) to measure the performance of public schools by testing fourth- and eighth-graders. The 1999 PSB/DLC poll found 69 percent support for a single, agreed-upon set of national standards, compared to just 27 percent opposition.

And a June 1999 National Public Radio/Kaiser Family Foundation (NPR/KFF) survey recorded 94 percent support for making students meet adequate academic standards to be promoted or graduate and 87 percent support for using standardized tests to ensure that students meet national academic standards. The public's basic commitment to standards has not changed much since the 2000 election, either.

In a 2001 Educational Testing Service (ETS) survey, 89 percent supported making it easier to fire incompetent teachers; 83 percent supported creating standards for student achievement to be monitored through testing; 77 percent favored testing student achievement and holding teachers and school administrators responsible for student learning; and 68 percent favored increased use of standardized testing "as part of a broader education initiative."

In the 2002 PDK/Gallup poll, conducted five months after passage of the NCLB, two-thirds of the public backed a key provision from the bill that mandated the tracking of student progress from grades 3 to 8 by means of an annual standardized test. Moreover, in the 2005 Gallup/PDK poll, by a 67 percent-to-28 margin, the public favored extending NCLB testing, which currently covers only one year in high school, to all four.

Similar numbers in the 2002 Gallup/PDK poll strongly supported other accountability measures from the NCLB. And, in January 2004, we still find 71 percent in a CBS News/*New York Times* poll saying they favor mandatory testing of students in public schools each year as a way to determine how well schools are educating students.

More Resources

Support for educational standards is rock-solid, but so too is support for increased resources. Americans for the last three decades, according to the University of Chicago's General Social Survey, have felt that too little, rather than too much, money is being spent on improving the nation's education system. And just as with support for higher standards and more accountability, support for more spending has strengthened over time, such that

support levels since 1990 are generally higher than in the 1980's and much higher than in the 1970's.

The last available survey in that series, conducted in 2004, illustrates the current strength of support for education spending very well. Almost three-quarters in that survey (74 percent) thought the government was spending too little on education, compared to a microscopic 5 percent who thought too much was being spent. This works out to a “net” spending figure (too little minus too much) of over 69 percent, a very impressive support level and a full 27 percentage points higher than that recorded by the survey series in 1973.

Government Spending

74 percent thought the government was spending too little on education

5 percent thought too much was being spent

2004 University of Chicago's General Social Survey

More recent questions continue to show the same majorities of about two-thirds or more in favor of increased education spending. But what kind of spending increase does the public have in mind—just a bit or something more substantial?

A 2002 Ipsos-Reid poll for Committee for Education Funding poll had an interesting exercise that shed light on this question. The survey told respondents that we spend about 2 and ½ cents per dollar of the federal budget on education and asked their opinion of spending 5 cents per dollar (in other words, doubling the amount). The response was overwhelmingly positive: 54 percent supported the notion, 30 percent thought we should actually spend *more*, and just 15 percent thought 5 cents per dollar would be too much. Even making allowances for the somewhat abstract nature of the exercise (there is no mention of budget allocations in total dollar terms), the level of positive response for such a radical spending increase is still impressive.

There is also strong evidence that the public sees a more important role for increased spending in solving the educational system's problems than it did previously. In the 2006 Gallup/PDK poll, for example, lack of financial support/funding/money topped the list of problems mentioned by respondents in an open-ended question about the troubles facing public schools in their communities. That's a departure from the pattern in the 1990s, when problems such as lack of discipline and drug use tended to top the list.

But since 2001, when lack of funding first tied lack of discipline as the most important problem (with 15 percent of respondents citing each), lack of funding has moved rapidly upwards and is now mentioned by 24 percent of respondents. Lack of discipline, in contrast, has declined somewhat and is mentioned by only 11 percent.

Indeed, lack of discipline has now slipped to third place, behind overcrowded schools, which is, in essence, a resources/spending issue. Clearly the public's perception of the importance of education spending has increased substantially. What's more, Americans claim they would feel roughly the same way about increased education spending even if their taxes were to go up, as shown by the results of numerous survey questions going back many years.

This is especially true if the polling question indicated that increased tax revenue would be earmarked for improving public schools (67 percent support in a Lake Sosin Perry/Public Education Network 2003 poll; 79 percent support in the 2004 ETS poll). Of course, one should never assume that raising taxes for such a purpose would be easy, but it does speak to the intensity of public support for increased education spending.

The public does have doubts—sensibly enough—on the efficacy of simply spending money to solve educational problems. What the public really wants is not just increased education spending in general but increased education spending on reforms and improvements it deems effective. Survey data consistently shows that the public is more supportive of certain reforms and improvements that cost money than they are of simply increasing funding for education. In an interesting 2003 finding from the Mellman Group, support for increased education spending actually went up by 13 points once it was specified what that increased funding was for.

So what, specifically, are the educational improvements the public would like to see funded? Start with more and better teachers and smaller class size, which are consistently near or at the top of the public's priorities in education surveys. For example, in a 2003 Lake Sosin Perry/Public Education Network (PEN) survey, the top two priorities for improving the educational system were raising teacher quality and smaller class size.

Generally speaking, supermajorities of the public support increasing education spending in these areas. Here are some illustrative findings from the 2001 ETS survey: 89 percent of the public supported hiring more teachers to reduce class size; 89 percent supported raising teacher salaries to hire and retain good teachers; and 81 percent supported raising teacher pay for most teachers and doubling salaries for the top 20 percent of teachers, based on performance and qualifications.

Similarly, in the 2006 ETS survey, a proposal to “dramatically increase teachers’ salaries to attract more well-qualified teachers” received 73 percent support—even when it was specified that this would entail “a significant increase in taxes.”

The public also heavily favors school modernization and construction. In the 2001 ETS survey, 78 percent said they supported using more taxpayer funds to build and repair schools. And in the 1998 Gallup/PDK poll, a proposal to “provid[e] funds to help repair and replace older school buildings” received support from an overwhelming 86 percent of the public, higher even than public support for the very popular idea of class size reduction in the early primary grades (80 percent).

Neither the ETS nor the Gallup/PDK question mentioned a specific amount. But other polling data show similar levels of support for specific proposals to spend \$22 billion (82 percent in a 1999 Luntz Research poll) or \$30 billion (74 percent in a 1998 Greenberg Research/Tarrance Group/AFT/NEA poll) on modernization/construction efforts.

Another item that appears high on the public's list of education spending priorities is expanding the availability of pre-school. According to a 2001 Hart Research/National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) poll, 87 percent of the public supported (and among them 64 *strongly* supported) creating state government programs to make preschool universally available to all parents who wish to enroll their children.

Similarly, in 2002 Gallup/PDK poll, 82 percent of the public said they favored making pre-K schooling available as part of the public school system. In the 2003 Lake Sosin Perry/PEN poll, early childhood education actually topped a list of 9 education areas—including teacher training, pay, and reducing class size—that the public wanted protected from budget cutbacks.

The public also shows strong interest in the expansion of after-school programs. In a 2003 Lake Sosin Perry/Tarrance Group/Afterschool Alliance poll, 88 percent of the public said they favored (and among them 58 percent strongly favored) providing comprehensive, five days a week after-school programs in their community. Seventy-seven percent said they favored having the federal government set aside funds to pay for these programs. In the 2006 ETS poll, 81 percent favored expanding after-school programs and lowering elementary school class sizes, even if this increased the per-pupil cost by thousands of dollars.

Would the public support additional spending specifically designed to improve public schools for disadvantaged children? The polls say they would. In the 1998 Gallup/PDK poll, two-thirds of the public said they would pay higher taxes just to provide the revenues needed for such spending, and 83 percent in a 1998 Peter Harris/Recruiting New Teachers poll agreed strongly that, if necessary, more money should be spent to bring fully qualified teachers to the economically disadvantaged.

Finally, the 2002 Committee for Education Funding survey asked respondents to rate different reasons to increase spending on education. Topping the list was improving recruitment and retention of quality teachers, consistent with findings mentioned above. Intriguingly though, the second most popular reason was “to give students from low-income families equal access to the opportunities education provides,” with 60 percent saying it was a very good reason and another 28 percent saying it was a fairly good reason. This result suggests that the public’s support for increased education spending is, importantly, motivated by concerns that go beyond their own children and community.

Accountability and Resources

Respondents were asked what the best way to improve the quality of the public education was: more funding, accountability, or both accountability and funding.

48 percent responded both accountability and funding

25 percent responded more funding

23 percent responded accountability

2001 ETS survey

The public’s preferences for more accountability *and* more resources, then, seem crystal clear. The linkage between the two is neatly captured by a result from the 2001 ETS survey. Respondents were asked what was the best way to improve the quality of public education: more funding, accountability, or both accountability and funding. The dominant response was accountability *and* funding (48 percent), rather than simply more funding (25 percent) or accountability (23 percent).

No Child Left Behind Act

In many ways, that was the promise of the bipartisan No Child Left Behind Act. Backers of NCLB, which included the Bush administration and its conservative congressional allies alongside liberals such as Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-MA) and Rep. George Miller (D-CA), maintained that the strict standards set by the law would be accompanied by increased funding that would help schools, particularly those with many at-risk students, meet those goals.

The public for its part was also favorably disposed toward the bill in the period before its passage. The 2001 ETS poll, for example, reported support levels ranging from 58 percent (funds tied to performance) to 93 percent (funding for K-3 reading), with the emphasis on annualized testing scoring about in the middle of that range (76-78 percent). The poll also found, however, that a large chunk of the public—about two-fifths—did not have any real knowledge about the bill prior to being asked about it on the survey. The 2002 Gallup/PDK poll, conducted roughly five months after passage of the bill, found similar support levels for NCLB's general provisions, combined with the same lack of prior knowledge of NCLB among two-fifths on the public.

Since that period leading up to and right after NCLB's passage, however, the bipartisan political consensus around education policy has collapsed. Critics complain that the implementation of NCLB has been inflexible and underfunded, constituting, in many ways, an “unfunded mandate” on the states. Republican-dominated state legislatures in Ohio, Virginia, and Utah have severely criticized the law and threatened to opt out of federal funding to avoid being subject to it.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to gauge how much public support for NCLB has shifted due to the lack-of-knowledge problem, which is still fairly severe. Looking at the 2006 Gallup/PDK poll, for example, 55 percent still say that they know very little or nothing at all about it. Reflecting this lack of knowledge, 37 percent say that they don't know enough to have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the Act. Those that believe they know enough to have an opinion split about 50 percent to 50 percent between favorable and unfavorable views of NCLB.

This mixed review turns to negative when many specific aspects of NCLB implementation are considered. Looking at the same poll, by a 69 to 28 percent margin, the public doesn't think that a single statewide test provides a fair picture of whether a school needs improvement. By 81 to 18 percent, they don't think that testing devoted to English and math only can provide a fair picture of whether a school in their community needs improvement.

In the same poll, 80 percent said that if their child's school is in need of improvement they would prefer that additional efforts be made to help their child achieve in that school, compared to 17 percent who say they'd rather transfer their child to another school not so designated. By 75 to 21 percent, they don't think students enrolled in special education should be held to the same academic standards as other students in a school.

Similarly, by a 62 percent-to-33 percent margin, they don't think the standardized test scores of special education students should be included with the test scores of other students in determining whether a school needs improvement. And by 81 to 17 percent, they believe a

school's performance is better assessed by looking at the improvement students have made during the course of the year, rather than by the percentage of students passing a year-end test.

Finally, in the 2005 Gallup/PDK poll, by 63 to 32 percent, respondents say that the amount of testing improvement required for a school should vary depending on where a school's achievement levels begin, rather than being uniform across schools. Similar data come from a January 2004 Greenberg Quinlan Rosner/Tarrance Group/National Education Association (GQR/TG) poll, in which 67 percent agreed that the law was unfair because it labels schools as "failing," if one group of students doesn't do well on a test—even if the vast majority do. Seventy-one percent agreed that some students should be given more time to pass tests for their grade due to differing ability levels. And 89 percent supported a proposal to allow schools to evaluate students' progress on a number of criteria in addition to standardized tests, including classroom performance and graduation rates.

Imposing financial sanctions on schools with poorly performing schools also proved to be unpopular. In a January 2004 CBS News/*New York Times* poll, the public, by 58 points (77 to 19 percent), opposed using the results of tests to withhold federal funds from those schools where students perform poorly. And over four-fifths (81 percent) in the GQR/TG poll wanted schools to be given more time before penalties are assessed if funding promised by NCLB has not yet been given to these schools. In the same poll, by a 60 to 38 percent margin, voters supported increased funding, rather than cuts, for schools that are not able to meet federal testing standards.

Still, there is little evidence that the public rejects the law itself or wants to do away with it. General descriptions of NCLB, particularly its goals and broad emphasis on accountability, continue to elicit strong public support. But it seems fair to note that the public would be supportive of changes that would make NCLB more flexible and better-funded. Or, in other words, the law has not yet satisfactorily met the public's dual goals of more accountability and more funding—significant change is called for.

Vouchers

Of course, there is a influential school of thought that says, whether NCLB is amended or just ended, the whole project of reforming the public school system is doomed to failure unless effective market pressures are introduced into the system through the provision of vouchers to attend private schools.

But, as we have seen, most of the public actually likes their local school and, while they support high standards, they believe that meeting those standards and the general goal of a good education will require an infusion of resources into the school system. It is no wonder then that vouchers, generally believed to put a drain on funding for the public schools, do not generate a lot of public enthusiasm.

Consider the following: In the Gallup/PDK annual poll on education, probably the best continuing source of public opinion data on education issues, support for vouchers increased from 1993/1994 to 1998, then dropped from 1998 to 2001, then rose in 2002, then fell again in 2003, only to rise again in 2004, then fall again in 2005 and 2006.

This is the question Gallup/PDK has asked in every one of these years: “Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?” Even in 2004, after the uptick between 2003 and 2004, the response was 54 percent opposed and 42 percent in favor. And this year, after the declines in the last two years, the response was 60 percent opposed, 36 percent in favor. The average response from the 1998 peak to today has been 57 percent opposed and 40 percent in favor.

An alternative-question wording by Gallup/PDK has elicited a somewhat more positive response on vouchers, but the pattern remains the same: rising support until 1998, falling support from 1998 to 2001, and then increasing support in 2002 (the question has not been asked since then). This question asks about allowing parents to send children to any “public, private or church-related school,” with government picking up all or part of the tuition for non-public school choices. In this case, the 2002 response was 52 percent favorable and 46 percent opposed, and the average from 1998 to 2002 was exactly split—49 percent in favor and 49 percent opposed.

Such inconclusive results are common in public opinion research on vouchers. By and large, questions that emphasize taxpayer or public expense and full funding of private school tuition tend to elicit slightly negative responses (the first Gallup/PDK question), while those that deemphasize the taxpayer/public source of voucher money and allude to partial, rather than full, coverage of tuition (the second question) tend to generate more positive responses. But the close division of the public in either case suggests a policy that is not particularly popular, no matter how it is presented to the public.

And the types of questions that tend to produce negative responses—those that emphasize the taxpayer/public expense of funding a voucher system—are consistent with the idea that

A Question of Vouchers

Do you favor or oppose the government offering parents money or “vouchers” to send their children to private or religious schools, or public schools outside their district, or haven’t you heard enough about that to have an opinion?

31 percent in favor

36 percent opposed

33 percent said they hadn’t heard enough to have an opinion

These pro-voucher respondents were then asked the follow-up question: *Would you still favor this if it meant there would be less money for public schools in your area?*

52 percent said they would still support vouchers

44 percent moved into opposition

June/July, 1999 Kaiser/NPR/Kennedy School of Government survey

vouchers' chief political vulnerability is voters' fear that vouchers would drain money and resources from the public schools. Indeed, follow-up questions in some surveys indicate just how soft the expressed support is for vouchers—when confronted with the possibility that public schools might lose funding as a result.

In a June/July 1999 Kaiser/NPR/Kennedy School of Government survey, respondents were asked: “Do you favor or oppose the government offering parents money or “vouchers” to send their children to private or religious schools, or public schools outside their district, or haven’t you heard enough about that to have an opinion?” This produced a typically split response—31 percent in favor and 36 percent opposed—but note that 33 percent said they hadn’t heard enough to have an opinion.

The 31 percent in favor can reasonably be said to be the most well-informed and presumably committed voucher supporters. These pro-voucher respondents were then asked the follow-up question: “Would you still favor this if it meant there would be less money for public schools in your area?” In this context, only about half (52 percent) said they would still support vouchers, while 44 percent moved into opposition.

This is exactly why voucher programs fare so poorly in referendums at election time, where the loss-of-funding issue is typically key to the arguments of voucher opponents. In fact, in 2000, vouchers lost in California by 71 to 29 percent, and in Michigan by 69 to 31 percent in campaigns where the drain on public funding for schools was the critical issue. There is no reason to believe that voucher referendums will fare any better today since the public is, if anything, more supportive of school funding than it was several years ago.

But what if vouchers were means-tested—that is, tilted toward low-income families, who are presumably most in need of escaping bad public schools? Would the public be any more supportive of such a system?

Not on the evidence of current polling data. In 2002, both ABC News and the Associated Press asked questions along these lines and both polls found that making vouchers available only to low-income families met with a tepid response which changed to outright opposition when it was posited that the public schools would lose some funding as a result. For example, the ABC News poll showed close to an even split on the basic proposition (50 percent in favor and 47 percent opposed), but 42 percent of those in favor expressed opposition if such vouchers meant losses in public school funding. That brought total opposition to the proposal to 68 percent, with just 29 percent in favor.

Of course, none of this gainsays the fact that there is a fair amount of support out there for some of the *ideas* behind vouchers—chiefly, that of choice (in general) and the ability of parents to opt out of poorly-performing schools (in particular). The latter motivation helps explain why African-Americans and especially poor blacks tend to be unusually supportive of vouchers.

Would the public be more supportive of a system that provided more choice but did not appear to pose the danger of draining funds from public schools? There is good evidence to suppose they would. For example, in a 1999 Penn Schoen Berland/Democratic Leadership Council poll, the public by a 58 to 33 percent margin preferred allowing parents with children in low-performing schools to send their children to the public school they think is

best, rather than allowing them to send their children to alternative schools, including private schools.

This brings us to the topic of public school choice. While there has been relatively little polling on this subject, it is striking how uniformly positive public reaction tends to be. A variety of questions with different wordings on this issue have been used since 1987 and they all elicit strong evidence of public support—from a low of 60 percent (2:1) to a high of 82 percent (4:1) in favor of public school choice. Similarly, the provisions of NCLB that deal with public school choice have always had strong support—most recently 87 percent in a January 2004 Pew/Kaiser poll.

From 1989 onwards, there has also some indication of increasing public support for the general idea of public school choice. In terms of demographics, results that are available from a 1997 survey indicate that support is stronger for this approach at lower education and income levels—not surprising given that the most affluent areas tend to have the best neighborhood schools. But even among the affluent support is still strong, just not as strong as among their lower-earning counterparts.

Even so ardent a proponent of vouchers as Terry Moe, the Stanford University professor who co-authored (with Hoover Institution visiting fellow John Chubb) the seminal pro-voucher book, *Politics, Market and America's Schools*, has to admit that evidence from his own survey (presented in his 2001 book, *Schools, Vouchers and the American Public*) shows the public much more sympathetic to public school choice than vouchers. Indeed, in his survey, 69 percent of the public supports public school choice within school districts and 75 percent supports choice outside of districts if space is available, compared to 60 percent support for vouchers (and that from a question well-crafted to produce a sympathetic response).

Significantly, the very parents who typically are held up as the chief beneficiaries of vouchers proponents, inner city parents, are almost unanimous (84 to 88 percent) in their support for public school choice, according to Moe's polling data.

This suggests that the public's interest in choice and, in particular, the ability of parents to opt out of poorly-performing schools, can be addressed by moving to expand public school choice. The public, particularly those with children in poorly-performing schools, would likely welcome such an expansion.