

cape Council for American Private Education outlook

"Voice of the Nation's Private Schools"

December 1999 • Number 250

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Survey Finds Public Likes School Choice, Private Schools

By a margin of nine to one, Americans believe parents should have the right to choose their child's school, according to a report released last month by Public Agenda, a research organization based in New York City. Moreover, if they were given a choice of schools—along with the financial wherewithal to exercise it—a full 55 percent of parents who currently send their children to public schools would want to send them to private schools.

The report, titled *On Thin Ice*, presents findings from a poll taken last summer to assess the public's attitudes on vouchers, charter schools, and related issues. The survey of 1,200 citizens, about one-third of whom were parents of school-age children, was bolstered by insights from five focus groups. The study's title attempts to convey the finding that most Americans know very little about the issues in question and have not fully formed or hardened their positions.

But while some of the opinions expressed by respondents may be tentative and ill-focused, others seem firm and clear. People who have private schools in their communities, for example, believe by wide margins that such schools "generally provide a better education" than public schools and do a better job "teaching academic skills" and "maintaining discipline and order." (For 67 percent of respondents, the term "private schools" refers to "parochial schools or Christian academies," while for 16 percent it refers to "nonreligious private schools.")

Majority Favors Vouchers

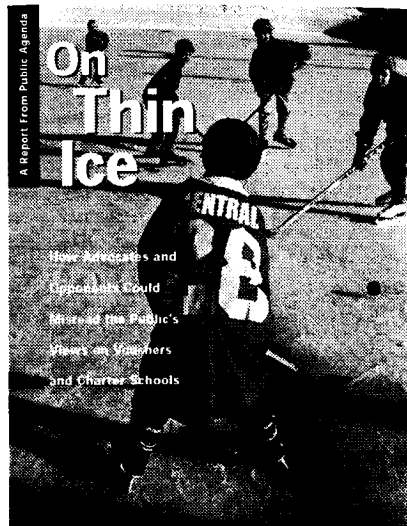
Consistent with the public's overwhelming support for freedom of choice in education, 57 percent of those polled favor vouchers "to pay for all or part of tuition" in a private or parochial school. Not surprisingly, support is significantly stronger among African Americans, Hispanics, and parents of school-age children. Almost 7 out of 10 parents (68 percent)

favor the concept.

Although both advocates and opponents of vouchers tend to depict the proposal in stark contrasts—either as solving or worsening the nation's education problems—the public tends to take a more balanced approach. When asked which description of vouchers comes closest to their own views, 11 percent called them "a good idea that promises to solve the nation's education problems"; 67 percent said they were "a good idea

but they cannot solve the nation's education problems"; and 17 percent said vouchers were "a bad idea that will make the nation's education problems worse." The upshot: most people (78 percent) place vouchers in the "good idea" column, but don't consider them a cure-all for educational ailments.

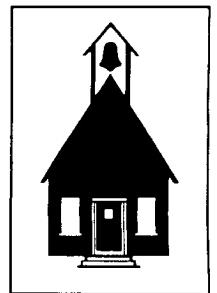
In a similarly sensible stance, most Americans do not share the view of voucher opponents who regard the measure as the death knell for public education. True, 20 percent believe vouchers are an effort "to destroy the public school system," but a sizeable 67 percent take a contrary position, seeing vouchers as a means "to pressure the public school system to improve and therefore save it."



Help for Failing Kids and Schools

As for vouchers being a help for a particular set of students, namely, those doing badly in public schools, 63 percent of respondents have some or a lot of confidence that such students would do better in private school, while 32 percent have little or no confidence that things would turn out that way. A related question asks respondents to predict whether "school vouchers will rescue many kids from failing public

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schools and give them a chance to fulfill their potential." Sixty-four percent of Americans think that outcome is likely, and 28 percent think it isn't.

In My Neighborhood?

Are Americans ready to see a voucher program start in their own community? More than 3 in 10 (32 percent) say they are, and another 44 percent say they would be "only if it first shows good results in other communities." Notably, only 19 percent respond with a flat-out no. And in the spirit of Ameri-

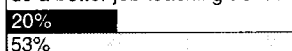
Public or Private

In your local area, is it the public schools or the private schools that...

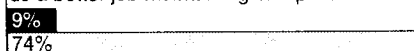
generally provide a better education?



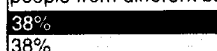
do a better job teaching academic skills?



do a better job maintaining discipline and order?



do a better job teaching kids to get along with people from different backgrounds?



Private Public

Base: People who have private schools in local area (n=879)

can pragmatism, where what works counts most. 60 percent of those who oppose vouchers say they would "view them more positively if the kids using them were doing better and public schools improved."

Definite Ideas on Vouchers

Whether they want vouchers to start now or not, Americans have definite ideas regarding particular elements of a voucher program. They seem certain, for example, that all families, not just low income families, should be eligible for vouchers; that religious schools should be included, and that parents of voucher students should be expected to pay at least part of the tuition (see chart).

Six out of ten (62 percent) respondents favor "having more scholarships available to hardworking students in weak public schools so they can switch to private school."

In explaining the public's comfort with including religious schools in voucher programs, the report notes, "Some parents would simply rather send their children to schools that teach religion, cannot afford to do so, and hope vouchers would make that possible." Other parents, according to the report, may be looking for elements associated with religious schools, such as discipline, uniforms, and respect. "Hallways that are orderly, students that are civil, classrooms where teachers are in control—these are the images that come to people's minds when they start talking about why religious schools should be part of the answer."

The public's sense of what would happen to public schools if they faced more competition is hard to figure out. On the one hand, there is a split on whether "teachers and administrators working in the public schools will try harder to do a good job if they see they are losing more and more kids to private schools." Forty-nine percent agree with that statement, while 47 percent disagree. On the other hand, 57 percent believe public schools spurred by competition "would fight to get better and eventually improve in order to hold on to their students."

The Big Picture

Aside from gauging opinion on the details of school choice, the survey also assesses the attitudes of Americans on some big-picture issues in education. For example, more than 6 in 10 people (62 percent) agree that the nation's public schools "have some good things about them" but need "major change." Another 16 percent think there is "so much wrong with public schools that we need to create a whole new system altogether."

If you designed a voucher program, which would you want?	General Public
All families to be eligible, regardless of income	72%
-OR-	
Only low-income families to be eligible	22%
To allow parents to use vouchers only for non-religious schools	14%
-OR-	
For parents to use the vouchers to send kids to religious schools as well	78%
To require parents to come up with some tuition money themselves	64%
-OR-	
For vouchers to cover the entire cost of tuition, as long as it was reasonable	28%

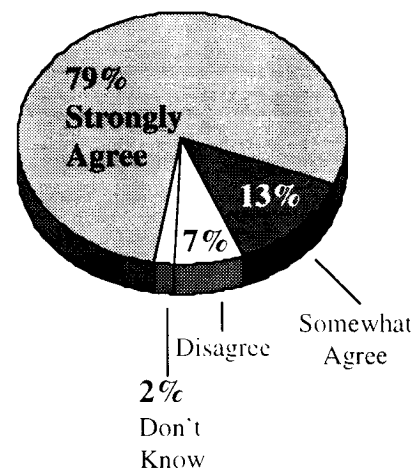
Finally, 19 percent believe public schools "are doing pretty well and need little change." Support for public education runs deep, with 64 percent saying the country "needs a strong public school system to stay a healthy democracy." Even so, 85 percent of respondents say the country "would be better off or it would make little difference" if "most students were attending private schools instead of public ones."

For more information on the report, visit the Web site of the Public Agenda: www.publicagenda.org.

School Choice

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement?

Parents should have the right to choose the school they want their child to attend.



Base: Parents of K-12 children. (n=329)

Private School Students Score Above Average in Civics

Every once in a while, opponents of school choice take a not so subtle swipe at private schools by suggesting they are not as effective as government schools in transmitting democratic values and producing good citizens. As the argument goes, when it comes to preparing productive citizens, public schools are the true-blue American schools—the foundation of freedom—instilling in students a knowledge of civics, a love of democracy, and a tolerance for diversity.

Well, last month the National Center for Education Statistics released the results of an assessment of student achievement in civics, a test intended to “measure how well American youth are being prepared to meet their citizenship responsibilities.” And it turns out that students in private schools scored well above the national average. As the report put it, “At all three grades [4, 8, 12], the percentages at or above each of the achievement levels were higher among students attending nonpublic schools than among their peers attending public schools.” The accompanying chart shows the percentage of students at or

above each of the three achievement levels established for the test: *Basic* (partial mastery of fundamental knowledge and skills), *Proficient* (solid academic performance), and *Advanced* (superior performance).

Based on the premise that civics education is “critical to the survival of democratic government,” the test was geared to gauge the degree to which schools are producing informed, capable, and active citizens. Specifically, the assessment attempted to measure three components of “civic competency”:

- knowledge,
- intellectual and participatory skills,
- civic dispositions.

The knowledge component covered such concepts as civic life, politics, the foundations of government, the role of citizens, and the principles of democracy. Intellectual and participatory skills included “those skills of mind and action that allow individuals to apply civic knowledge to good effect.” Finally, the civic disposition component examined whether students know and understand the importance of behaviors such as “respecting individual worth and hu-

man dignity” and “participating in civic affairs in an informed, thoughtful, and effective manner.”

The NAEP 1998 Civics Report Card is available on the NCES Web site at: <http://nces.ed.gov>

% of Students At or Above Key Levels in NAEP Civics Test		
	Public	Private
Grade 4		
Basic	67	84
Proficient	21	35
Advanced	1	4
Grade 8		
Basic	68	89
Proficient	20	40
Advanced	1	4
Grade 12		
Basic	63	80
Proficient	25	38
Advanced	4	7

Federal Education Aid (in millions of dollars)

Key Programs Affecting Private Schools

	FY 1999	FY 2000
Bilingual Education	\$224.0	\$248.0
Capital Expenses	\$24.0	\$12.0
Class-Size Reduction	\$1,200.0	\$1,300.0
Education Technology (Part A)	\$125.0	\$158.7
Eisenhower Professional Devp.	\$335.0	\$335.0
Goals 2000	\$491.0	\$491.0
Reading and Literacy Grants	\$260.0	\$260.0
Safe and Drug-Free Schools	\$566.0	\$605.8
Special Education	\$5,334.1	\$6,036.6
Teacher Training in Technology	\$75.0	\$75.0
Technology Literacy Challenge	\$425.0	\$425.0
Title I (Total)	\$8,426.9	\$8,678.9
Title VI	\$375.0	\$380.0

Big Boost in Fed Ed Spending

Last month Congress approved and President Clinton signed an omnibus spending package for FY 2000, which includes \$35.6 billion in funding for federal education programs—\$2.1 billion or 6.3 percent more than FY 1999.

The spending plan contains a new provision requiring school districts to offer public school choice to parents of children in chronically poor-performing Title I schools. “This is a significant step forward for Title I parents and their children,” said House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman Bill Goodling (R-PA).

The package also includes \$1.3 billion, an increase of \$100 million from last year, for a program to help districts reduce class size by recruiting, hiring, and training teachers. A change in the one-year-old program allows school districts to use up to 25 percent of the funds for professional development. The current cap is 15 percent. The change is significant for private schools, because to the extent a district uses these funds for the professional development of public school teachers, it must provide equitable services designed to meet the unique needs of private school teachers.



Return Service Requested

capenotes

• Continuing its tortuous journey through the thickets of church-state jurisprudence, the U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments on December 1 in *Mitchell v. Helms*, a case that will determine whether it is constitutional for the federal government to provide computers and instructional materials to students in religious schools. The history of the high court's decisions on matters of government aid to religious school students is confounding. Past rulings have allowed textbooks, for example, but have disallowed items like globes and maps.

The blurry line between acceptable and unacceptable forms of aid apparently caused some humorous comments during the hour-long hearing. *The Washington Post* reported that **Justice Antonin Scalia** repeated the famous quip by **Sen. Daniel P. Moynihan** (D-N.Y.), who once asked, if textbooks are allowed and maps are not, what about an atlas, a book of maps? And *Education Daily* reported that when the attorney arguing against the aid conceded that the government might be able to provide

musical instruments to students without violating the constitution, **Chief Justice William Rehnquist** got some laughs when he asked, "What if they played 'O Come, All Ye Faithful'?"

The court's decision in the case is expected sometime before July 1, 2000.

• *Making School Choice Work for All Families: A Template for Legislative and Policy Reform*, by University of California School of Law professors **John E. Coons** and **Stephen D. Sugarman**, is designed to help choice advocates prepare the "detailed blueprints" for school choice initiatives. The authors, who have had considerable experience in crafting school choice initiatives, examine the pros and cons of various design elements in choice legislation, including who should receive choice scholarships, how much should the scholarships be worth, how should they be distributed, and how should participating schools be held accountable. In his foreword to this clear-sighted treatise, **Dr. Floyd Flake** says, "This book should be considered the manual for people...with a sincere interest in the choice movement."

The publication is available for

\$19.95 from the Pacific Research Institute by calling the publications department at 415-989-0833. It is also available online for free at <http://www.pacificresearch.org>.

• At long last, a federal law has been passed and signed that promotes school choice for students in public or private schools. Well, sort of. Signed by **President Clinton** last month, the *District of Columbia College Access Act of 1999* helps D.C. residents who graduate from public or private high schools expand their post-secondary options by reducing their tuition at certain public or private colleges. Students who attend public colleges in Virginia or Maryland will receive up to \$10,000 per year in tuition subsidies to qualify them for the tuition rates paid by state residents, and those who attend private colleges in the D.C. area will receive up to \$2,500 in assistance. When he signed the law, the president said the program will "greatly expand both public and private post-secondary opportunities for D.C. residents." *The Washington Post* described the new law as "part of a strategy to encourage families to remain in or move to Washington."