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Even in Troubled Times, Quality Public Education Remains Nation's Top Priority

New National Poll Shows Strong Support For Protecting K-12 Schools from Budget Cuts; Many Americans Want Feds, Not States, To Pay Extra Costs To Implement No Child Left Behind

WASHINGTON – February 24, 2003 – Despite worries over a potential war with Iraq, domestic terrorist attacks, rising medical insurance costs, and ballooning federal and state budget deficits, a new national poll conducted in late January reveals that education is a top priority for American voters. Participants rated protecting and strengthening education of greater concern than health care, terrorism, national security, Social Security, and job creation, according to a national survey released today by Public Education Network and *Education Week*.

The poll also reveals that voters believe state budget crises could slow the pace of school improvement across the nation. While many Americans favor the new federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB), they are worried that the states cannot afford to implement it. Many voters say the federal government – not the states – should provide the necessary funds to implement NCLB.

Demanding Quality Public Education in Tough Economic Times: What Voters Want from Elected Leaders, the fourth in a series of annual polls, assesses public opinion on what should be done to improve low-performing schools and what actions voters would take to hold elected officials accountable for education. The poll shows voters want state and local lawmakers to know more about education, fight for more education funds, and hold schools accountable for performance. It also shows that – by almost a two-to-one margin – Americans would vote against lawmakers who fail to fight for adequate education funding.

“In tough economic times and amid global uncertainty, voters are saying loud and clear that education is a core American value,” says Wendy D. Puriefoy, president of Public Education Network. “Voters view education as an essential service and they are not going to support lawmakers who jeopardize education.”

“This report shows what Americans want their elected leaders to do to guarantee all students access to a high-quality education,” says Virginia B. Edwards, editor and publisher of *Education Week*. “The public won’t get sidetracked by politics, war or pressure to balance budgets when it comes to protecting education.”

State Budget Cuts and School Improvement

According to a February report from the National Conference of State Legislatures, only six states will face either no budget deficit or a deficit of less than 5 percent in the coming fiscal year. Most states will face shortfalls between 5 and 10 percent; some states have gaps greater than 20 percent.

The PEN/*Education Week* poll shows that a majority of Americans (65 percent) believe that state budget cuts are having a serious or somewhat serious impact on their communities. Three-fourths believe that education programs in their state will be seriously or somewhat seriously affected.

Nonetheless, respondents say they want education protected. More voters want to protect education from budget cuts (54 percent) than health care/Medicare (32 percent), retirement funds (10 percent), and law enforcement/fire protection (7 percent). In fact, the report found that education is the only public service a clear majority of respondents want to see protected. The public is especially concerned about cuts in teacher salaries, teacher preparation and professional development, early childhood education, and increases in class size.

By a two-to-one margin (including a majority of Republicans), voters say they are more concerned about cuts in services than tax increases. All voters, regardless of background, show significantly more support for tax increases if the new revenue is earmarked for education, though the intensity of support for tax increases is low.

No Child Left Behind: Strong Support, Unfunded Mandate

The public supports the key elements of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, which has refocused federal education spending on efforts to improve teacher quality, close achievement gaps, introduce annual testing, and hold schools accountable. Some 42 percent of voters say they have not heard of the law. After being informed about key aspects of the law, more than 7 in 10 (71 percent) favor NCLB while only 14 percent oppose it.

Voters believe state, federal, and local governments should share equal responsibility for ensuring that the law's provisions are met by school districts. However, three-fourths recognize that these improvements may cost more than current resources allow, and agree that the federal government (42 percent), not the states (24 percent), or local school districts (12 percent), should provide the extra funds.

By nearly a two-to-one margin, respondents also said they would vote against a U.S. senator or representative who refused to back sufficient funding for the law's implementation.

Americans Are Willing to Take Action for Better Schools

Many Americans attribute poor performance of schools to lack of parental involvement (22 percent), poor management (15 percent), misuse of resources (15 percent), and shortages of resources (15 percent). Far fewer say that schools fail because of unqualified teachers (9 percent), the poverty of their students (4 percent), poor curriculum (2 percent), or old school buildings (1 percent).

Most respondents said they would be willing to take action if a school in their community were designated as failing. Four-fifths (81 percent) said they would be very or somewhat willing to find out more information about a failing school. More than two-thirds (69 percent) would work to change the administration of the failing school or write a letter to a lawmaker indicating their concerns. On the other hand, only one-third (35 percent) would be willing to shut down a failing school in their community.

New Civic Index

The poll presents a new "civic index" that citizens can use to determine how well their local community supports public education. Top indicators of strong community support for public education include parent involvement, leadership of officeholders, active parent groups, knowledge of school board activities, and availability of school performance data.

Everyone Should Be Held Accountable

Respondents cited strong leadership by officeholders as the second most important factor (behind parents' responsibility) in guaranteeing quality education for young people. The public wants elected officials – not just educators and students – to be more involved in raising the quality of schools and to be held accountable for results. A majority (59 percent) say that a candidate's stand on education is either the most important factor or a very important factor in how they cast their votes in last November's elections.

Participants said that local candidates should not call themselves "education candidates" unless they demonstrate real knowledge of education issues (56 percent), fight for more education funds from Congress and the state legislature (48

percent), and hold schools accountable for their performance (42 percent). By contrast, voters do not support mayors who would take over school districts (9 percent) or give their schools over to private management (9 percent).

Similarly, 9 out of 10 voters want their state legislators to ensure that sufficient resources are available to schools. Respondents said they judge state legislators by their knowledge of education issues (61 percent), willingness to fight for more education funds from Washington (52 percent), and willingness to demand more education resources from the state (50 percent). They do not support state lawmakers who would take over schools (23 percent), or cut funds to low-performing schools (16 percent).

“The public shows strong support for initiatives that target additional funds to low-performing schools to help students achieve, rather than measures that penalize students for poor performance,” says Ms. Puriefoy. “Voters are going to judge elected leaders by their success in helping students learn, not just in labeling schools.”

Priorities for Improving Education

By a nearly two-to-one margin voters say the key to improving school performance is to raise teacher quality (27 percent). Participants also identified efforts to reduce class size (15 percent), ensure all students can read by 4th grade (12 percent), and raise student achievement in low-performing schools (12 percent) as important. Support for improving teacher quality also outpolled support for giving parents taxpayer money to allow their children to leave a failing school by a nine-to-one margin.

To improve teacher quality, nearly all voters (94 percent) would require all middle and high school teachers to have degrees in the subjects they teach. Nearly 8 in 10 (78 percent) respondents support programs that offer alternative routes to teaching, and more than two-thirds (68 percent) would support tax increases that underwrite signing and retention bonuses for teachers.

Three in five (59 percent) say they believe that it is possible to have a qualified teacher in every classroom by the year 2005, but a significant number (39 percent) believes that low teacher salaries present a significant obstacle to achieving this goal. Four out of five (82 percent) voters say that high quality teachers should be distributed equally among all schools, while just 13 percent say they should be assigned to the most disadvantaged schools.

“The public clearly recognizes the power of teaching and the need to help our nation’s dedicated teachers become even better,” says Ms. Puriefoy.

PEN recently launched www.GiveKidsGoodSchools.com to enable individuals to support and demand high-quality public education for all children in America. The Web site provides voters with valuable information about public education issues and allows constituents to contact their lawmakers to communicate their views on improving the pay, power, prestige, and preparation of teachers and other key priorities for strengthening public education."

Survey Methodology

The national public opinion poll, conducted by the polling firm Lake Snell Perry & Associates, includes responses from 1,050 voting-age Americans, including oversamples of 125 registered African-Americans and 125 registered Latino voters, with a margin of error of +/- 3.5 percent. Some questions were split sampled. Detailed report findings will be available in PDF format on the PEN website at www.publiceducation.org. For more information, contact Rebecca Pond at 202/955-9450.

Public Education Network (PEN) is a national organization of local education funds (LEFs) and individuals working to improve public schools and build citizen support for quality public education in low-income communities across the nation. PEN and its 78 LEF members work in 30 states and the District of Columbia on behalf of 10.6 million children in more than 1200 school districts, seeking to bring the community voice into the debate on quality public education in the firm belief that an active, vocal constituency will ensure every child, in every community, a quality public education. Education Week is the newspaper of record for American precollegiate education.

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