

CONTACT:

Naush Boghossian (818) 209-2787
Paul E. Peterson (617) 495-8312/495-7976
William G. Howell (312-550-3767
Martin R. West (617) 496-4803

Larson Communications
Harvard University
University of Chicago
Harvard University

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**August 25, 2010**

PUBLIC AND TEACHERS DIVIDED IN THEIR SUPPORT FOR MERIT PAY, TEACHER TENURE, RACE TO THE TOP

National Survey also reveals increased support for virtual schooling, support for charter schools rises sharply in minority communities

CAMBRIDGE, MA – The fourth annual survey conducted by Harvard’s Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) and *Education Next* on a wide range of education issues released today reveals that the broader public and teachers are markedly divided in their support for merit pay, teacher tenure and Race to the Top (RttT). The poll provides strong evidence from a nationally representative sample that most Americans support merit pay for teachers, while teachers oppose the policy by a large margin; there is strong opposition among the public to teacher tenure, while teachers favor it; and teachers are significantly more opposed to the federal RttT program than the broader public.

Survey questions and responses, along with an essay by survey authors William G. Howell, Paul E. Peterson and Martin R. West interpreting the results, are available online at the *Education Next* website: www.educationnext.org.

Support for “basing a teacher’s salary, in part, on his or her students’ academic progress on state tests” jumped five percentage points in one year, increasing from 44 percent in 2007 to 49 percent in 2010, while opposition declined from 32 to 25 percent. However, only 24 percent of teachers supported the idea, while 63 percent expressed opposition.

The poll revealed that those who oppose teacher tenure outnumber those who support it by a margin of almost 2:1. Forty-seven percent oppose the idea, while 25 percent favor it. Among teachers, 48 percent favored tenure.

Thirty-two percent of Americans think RttT is necessary to improve education, but 22 percent believe it is an unwarranted intrusion into state and local government. However, 46 percent of those polled expressed no opinion. Support is greater among African Americans and Hispanics who back the program by a margin of 48 percent to 12 percent. Meanwhile, teachers oppose RttT by a 2:1 margin, with only 22 percent saying they like the program, and 46 percent against it.

The PEPG-EdNext poll also revealed a surge in support for virtual schooling. Between 2009 and 2010, the percentage in favor of allowing high school students to take a course on the Internet increased from 42 percent to 52 percent, while opposition fell from 29 percent to 23 percent.

Support for charter schools remained essentially unchanged between 2008 and 2010—rising from 42 percent to 44 percent, while opposition increased from just 16 to 19 percent. The remaining group—36 percent—

remained neutral. However, support for charter schools in minority communities rose steeply—from 42 percent to 64 percent among African Americans and from 37 percent to 47 percent among Hispanics. Among teachers, charter support fell from 47 percent to 39 percent.

“When it comes to school choice, charters and learning on the Internet are ‘in,’ while vouchers are ‘out,’” Peterson commented.

Public backing for school vouchers, meanwhile, has fallen. While 45 percent of the American public supported vouchers in 2007, only 31 percent did so in 2010. During this same period, opposition grew from 34 percent to 43 percent.

On many issues—merit pay, requiring tests to graduate from high school, or maintaining federal testing requirements—partisan differences were relatively small. “When it comes to education reform policies, we detect more than a hint of bipartisanship,” West said.

Stronger partisan differences emerged when respondents were asked about the role of teachers’ unions, teacher tenure, and increased school spending. On these issues Democrats were markedly more supportive of increased spending, tenure for teachers, and the role teacher unions play in their local community.

The survey also asked the public about spending for education and found that the public is willing to spend more on public education, but not if it means being funded through increased local taxes.

“Despite the recession and the rising deficit, Americans are willing to spend more on education, but they express considerable reluctance to pay more in local taxes for that purpose,” says the poll’s survey director, William Howell. When asked whether they support “more government funding for public schools,” 63 percent of those surveyed said they did, but when asked whether “local taxes to fund public schools in your district should increase,” only 29 percent favored the idea.

For some issues, the survey asked alternative versions of the same question to randomly divided portions of the sample in order to see how responses varied with the way a question was worded or with specific information given to the respondent. For example, 59 percent of the public supported increases in teacher salaries when asked the question outright, but only 42 percent did so when first told current average teacher salaries in their states.

Other findings from the survey include:

- **Toughen State Testing and Standards** – Fifty-eight percent of the public thought states should toughen their testing and standards, but only 33 percent of teachers felt that way.
- **Tax Credits** – Tax credits for public and private school expenses continued to draw strong support in 2010—55 percent favored the idea, while only 20 percent opposed it, with the remaining taking the neutral position. Opinion remained unchanged from two years previously.
- **Teacher Unions** – More Americans believe teacher unions are blocking school reform (33 percent) rather than helping it (28 percent). But 39 percent take no position at all.
- **Maintain Federal Testing** – More Americans (62 percent) believe Congress should continue testing requirements in math and reading than oppose the idea (12 percent), with 26 percent taking a neutral position. But only 50 percent of teachers supported maintaining these requirements.

About the Public Opinion Survey

The PEPG-EdNext survey was conducted by the polling firm Knowledge Networks between May 11 and June 8, 2010. The findings are based on a nationally representative stratified sample of 1,184 U.S. adults (age 18 years and older) and oversamples of 684 teachers and 908 residents in zip codes with at least one charter school in the year 2009-10. The margin of error for responses given by the full sample in the PEPG-EdNext survey is roughly 2 percentage points.

The research was funded with a generous grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation as well as by grants from the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and the William E. Simon Foundation. The report incorporates data from earlier polls that were supported in part by the National Center on School Choice, which is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences (IES) (R305A040043). All opinions expressed represent those of the authors and not necessarily the institutions with which they are affiliated, the U.S. Department of Education or the foundations that supported the research. All errors in this paper are solely the responsibility of the authors.

About the Authors

William G. Howell is the Sydney Stein Professor of American Politics at the Harris School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago. Paul E. Peterson is the Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Government at Harvard University, senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, and editor-in-chief of *Education Next*. Martin R. West is assistant professor of education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and executive editor of *Education Next*.

About Education Next

Education Next is a scholarly journal published by the Hoover Institution that is committed to looking at hard facts about school reform. Other sponsoring institutions are the Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance, part of the Taubman Center for State and Local Government at the Harvard Kennedy School, and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation.

###