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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**August 3, 2011**

Public and Teachers Increasingly Divided on Key Education Issues

National Survey shows increased support for vouchers, but public's views on merit pay, charters, and other policies have not changed, though teacher opposition to reforms intensifies

CAMBRIDGE, MA – The fifth annual survey conducted by Harvard's [Program on Education Policy and Governance](#) (PEPG) and [Education Next](#) on a wide range of education issues reveals that the opinions of the public have remained largely unchanged since one year ago, despite controversies in Wisconsin, Indiana and many other states. However, teacher opposition to many reforms has increased, placing them more at odds with views of the general public.

An article, "The Public Weighs In on School Reform," interpreting this year's results by William Howell, Martin West, and Paul Peterson, will appear in the Fall 2011 issue of [Education Next](#), and is currently available at www.educationnext.org.

Support for vouchers as a means to expand school choice increased by 8 percentage points between 2010 and 2011, the largest shift of public opinion over the course of the past year. Forty-seven percent of participants who were asked if they support or oppose "a proposal to give families with children in public schools a wider choice, by allowing them to enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition" indicated their support. "Although public opinion on most issues has remained stable, public support for vouchers has grown noticeably," West observes. "Meanwhile, teacher opinion has changed in a direction opposite to that of the public on such issues as merit pay and teacher tenure."

Public opinion on charter schools showed little change, even though the topic received substantial media attention over the past year. Forty-three percent of the American public support charters, and among teachers, favorable views of charters increased from 39 percent in 2010 to 45 percent this year. Only 18 percent of the public opposes charter schools. Of those surveyed, 39 percent of the public and 18 percent of teachers took a neutral position.

Notably, 33 percent of the public thinks that teachers unions have a generally negative effect on the nation's public schools, virtually unchanged from 31 percent and 33 percent in 2009 and 2010, respectively. The share perceiving a positive union impact has hardly budged from 28 percent in 2010

to 29 percent in 2011; 38 percent are neutral on unions' impact. Teacher opinion is moving in the opposite direction: 58 percent think they have a positive impact, an increase from 51 percent the previous year. Meanwhile the percentage of teachers saying that unions have a negative impact on the nation's schools has dropped to 17 percent from 25 percent in 2010.

Again this year, the poll found that a near majority of the public, 47 percent, favors merit pay – paying teachers, in part, based on the academic progress of their students on state tests. Only 27 percent oppose the idea. “Merit pay remains anathema to teachers, however, with only 18 percent in favor, and 72 percent in opposition,” Howell points out.

On teacher tenure, the public's opposition to it has done nothing more than tick upward from 47 percent in 2010 to 49 percent in 2011. The poll also shows that 55 percent of the public supports the principle that if tenure is given at all, it should be based on demonstrated success in raising student performance. Teachers, meanwhile, like tenure more than ever; 53 percent support it, up from 48 percent in 2010, and only 30 percent agree that tenure should be based on student academic progress.

The affluent – defined as college graduates who are in the top income decile in their state – are more critical of unions than is the public as a whole. Fifty-six percent say unions have a negative impact on their schools (versus 33 percent of the public as a whole). The affluent like their local schools better than most people do (54 percent grade them A or B versus 46 percent of the public as a whole) but they think less well of public schools nationally (only 15 percent give the nation's schools the highest two grades) and are more in favor of reforms such as charter schools. Teachers are much more generous in their evaluation, with 37 percent giving the nation's schools an A or B.

On questions of school spending, respondents' opinions depend on how much they know. For example, 59 percent of the public says that government funding for their district's public schools should increase. However, when they were informed about the level of per-pupil expenditure in their community, which averaged \$12,300 for the survey's respondents, enthusiasm for increased spending dampened, with public support falling to 46 percent.

In 2011, support for digital learning among the general public was 47 percent, a modest decrease from 52 percent the year before. Forty-nine percent of teachers support digital learning, as do 42 percent of the well-to-do. However, Peterson noted that “when respondents are asked about their own children, high levels of support are shown, with a majority of Americans and roughly two in three teachers indicating a willingness to have one of their children take ‘some academic courses’ in high school over the internet.”

When it comes to school and student accountability, the authors observe, “the public's appetite for standardized tests appears undiminished.” More than two in three Americans believe that the federal government should “continue to require that all students be tested in math and reading each year in grades 3-8 and once in high school,” which mirrors the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) testing mandates. Whereas NCLB allows each state to develop its own tests for determining student proficiency, solid pluralities of all subgroups support the creation of a single national test in both reading and math.

About the Public Opinion Survey

The Education Next-PEPG survey was conducted by the polling firm Knowledge Networks (KN) between April 15 and May 4, 2011. The survey interviewed a nationally representative sample of some 2,600 American citizens. In addition to the views of the public as a whole,

special attention was given to two potentially influential types of participants in school politics: teachers (surveyed as a separate representative group for the third year in a row) and the affluent (considered separately for the first time). Detailed information about the survey protocols is available online at www.knowledgenetworks.com/quality/.

About the Authors

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