



MEMORANDUM

TO: JEANNE ALLEN
CENTER FOR EDUCATION REFORM

FROM: BILL CULLO & BOB WARD
FABRIZIO, McLAUGHLIN & ASSOCIATES

RE: KEY FINDINGS FROM NATIONAL STUDY

DATE: MARCH 7, 1997

Fabrizio, McLaughlin & Associates is pleased to present the Center for Education Reform with the key findings from our recent survey of voter attitudes. Interviews were conducted among N=1,000 voters nationwide February 8-10, 1997. The margin of error associated with a sample of this type is $\pm 3.1\%$. The timing of the survey was intentionally conducted following President Clinton's State of the Union speech. By waiting a few days after the speech, voters were exposed to a myriad of analyses of the content of the speech while allowing for their own "gut reactions" to the speech as well.

The findings discussed in this memorandum are derived from the education reform section of our questionnaire. While this is by no means intended to be an exhaustive look at the education reform issue, it does represent a starting point by which we can assess where voter attitudes are in general with regard to the concepts associated with this pivotal issue. Unfortunately, the findings from our study almost raise as many questions as they answer. The following encompasses what we can say about the issue and what we do know about the education issue:

- Education is the primary issue concern of the electorate. Fully one-fifth of all voters indicate education is the most important issue to be addressed by the President and Congress.
- The importance of the issue cuts across virtually all demographic subgroups. The greatest determinant of its importance appears to be the gender and age of voters, but the importance does not wane with any major demographic subgroup.
- The need for reforming the education system is widely accepted.
- Voter attitudes with regard to how to reform the educational system are malleable, but focused on the concept of giving more control to parents and local government.
- Giving parents and local authority more control of the educational system is widely accepted.

And while many of the elements of accomplishing reform are present there are significant political impediments that stand in the way of true reform:

- There is a morass of confusion over the specifics in the education system. A majority of voters while they think private schools are more capable of providing a good education, also think public school is less expensive to administer than private school.

- There is an inherent contradiction in the way voters view the education system in the country. While the need to reform the educational system in the country is almost universal, better than three-quarters of the electorate think their local schools do a good job. Failing to link the failure of the current educational system to voters' local schools will ultimately doom the prospects of true reform in the system.
- Among the most significant impediments to reform is President Clinton. Seizing another opportunity to confuse voters, Clinton has skillfully positioned himself as an education reformer along the lines voters view these reforms. This is not necessarily the case as was evidenced in his State of the Union address when he violated among the major tenets of education reform (i.e. local and parental control) and discussing "national standards not federal government standards." This is vintage Clinton clouding the issue with semantics and portraying himself as everything to all.
- Politically there is also confusion or more precisely misinformation that runs rampant in the news and consequently what voters see and read about the issue of education reform. In the past few months, the NEA and Phi Delta Kappa have released findings that suggest that most voters oppose school choice and support a strong presence by the federal government. The agenda of both the NEA and PDK are abundantly clear in how their questions were posed to voters. This is a case of survey research being very dangerous as creatively phrased questions often times can elicit the "appropriate" response. However, to suggest that voters are opposed to parents and local government assuming more control at the expense of the federal government is counter intuitive to everything we know about the electorate.

Having said this, we must remain cognizant of the fact that the road to reforming the educational system through parental choice, vouchers, etc. is probably not as well defined as we may think. This is an issue that is steeped in political rhetoric and must overcome the clutter and misinformation that is pervaded on the voting public.

What are the tasks that exist? What information do we have and what information do we need? Essentially how do we proceed from this point toward reforming the educational system with substantive reform?