



CER Special Report: Understanding the 49th Annual PDK Poll

The Public's Attitudes Toward
Public Schools Are Confused and Mixed

August 28, 2017

The headline from the **49th Annual PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools** reads, "Academic achievement isn't the only mission" of public schools.

For the more than 60 percent of U.S. students who lack proficiency in core subjects (less than 20 percent in some areas and higher than 60 percent in some affluent communities) this is an unfortunate, and likely wrong conclusion.

Amidst numerous confusing and leading questions, PDK reports strong support for traditional public schools, less support for "vouchers," a lack of support for "high-stakes testing," strong support for "wrap around services" and more career options.

While Americans do indeed appear united in numerous ways in their belief that schools must prepare students more fully and broadly for life, it's not at all clear from this poll that they reject the value of knowledge as important for that preparation. Educational excellence is not an end to a means - it's a means to an end. As Core Knowledge Founder E.D. Hirsch writes "only a well-rounded, knowledge-specific curriculum can impart needed knowledge to all children and overcome inequality of opportunity."

Here are our biggest takeaways from the 2017 annual poll:

1.

THE VOUCHER QUESTION IS STILL LOADED

For more than 20 years we have pointed out that asking people whether they like doing something at someone else's expense is not only sure to elicit a negative response, but is highly misleading.

PDK asks – do you favor or oppose choosing a private school at *public expense*? (Q4) 39 percent total favor while the percentage of non-white support is 46 percent.

From there they follow with a confusing array of choices as to whether or not one might choose a different school based on the money available. (Q5)

Respondents are asked generally whether they prefer making schools *more competitive* or *hurting them by reducing funding* (Q8). It's a Hobson's choice.

Disaggregating the data, qualitative opinions about schools are lower among lower income people, and higher where incomes are higher. Demand is higher as well among those who earn less - 40 percent of people making less than 100K favor vouchers versus 31 percent for people making over 100K.

A look at other polls and surveys find a much higher rate of support for educational choice in general when defined accurately –

- A **poll** conducted by the Associated Press and the NORC Center for Public Affairs Research at the University of Chicago in April, 2017 found that 43 percent of respondents support giving low-income families vouchers for private schools, 35 percent are opposed and 21 percent don't have a strong opinion either way. Fully 66 percent said they know little about private school choice.
- A July, 2017 Gallup **poll** found 59 percent of the public supports federal funding of private school choice programs.
- A statewide **survey** by the Public Policy Institute of California in April, 2017 found that “on the issue of tax-funded vouchers, 60 percent of adults and slightly more public school parents—66 percent—favor providing them to parents for use at any public, private, or parochial school.”

2.

SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLS REMAINS MIXED

The grades respondents' give their schools are split equally among grades A-F. PDK suggests that support for schools has never been higher with 49 percent of all respondents, and 62 percent of parents, giving schools an A and B. (Q30, 31) And why wouldn't that be the case? Parents generally like the schools their kids attend. Such an opinion however doesn't negate their desire for options.

In fact, according to PDK, "If cost and location were not issues, just one-third of parents say they'd pick a traditional public school over a private school (31 percent), public charter school (17 percent), or a religious school (14 percent)." (Q5) And "only slightly more than half of public school parents (54 percent) say they'd stick with a public school if they were offered public funds to send their child to a private or religious school" (assuming full tuition coverage).

In other words, if given a choice, half of parents would choose something other than a public school, which raises a paradox within the poll itself. If a majority of public school parents give their schools high marks, how is it that 50 percent would leave those systems if they could?

It is clear that for many parents, public schools are not seen as the end-all and be-all in educational opportunities, and that alternatives are strongly desired.

Another reference point on how the public perceives its schools is the 2017 Gallup **poll** released on August 21.

That survey found that seven in 10 U.S. adults say private schools do an excellent/good job, which far exceeds their 44 percent rating for public schools

Indeed, as PDK offers, "traditional schools don't command vast loyalty." And as PDK CEO Joshua Starr concedes in the summary, "most parents don't really know what goes on in school on a daily basis, other than what they gather from the homework that gets sent home or what their teenagers mumble at the dinner table."

3.

WHAT SCHOOLS SHOULD DO DEPENDS ON WHO YOU ARE, AND YOUR OWN OPPORTUNITIES

We agree with PDK that surveys are important mainly because what the public thinks deeply influences policymakers. But what parents and the public know is far less than they should.

On what schools should do and provide, there is much confusion. Fully 66 percent of respondents say the schools should be measured on test results as well as academic skill results. (Q26) And 58 percent are confident that standardized tests do a good job measuring how well their child is learning. (Q24) But 49 percent feel that the tests don't measure things that are important. (Q25)

- Most parents expect their students to attend college, but not necessarily a 4-year institution. Lower income or parents without a college education are less likely to see their own children aspiring to that goal.
- While the poll found 62 percent of public school parents gave their schools an A or B, only 30 percent believe public schools are currently offering the right amount of career or job skill classes to ensure students are prepared post-graduation.
- Respondents want schools to offer more support to students - (Q20, 21) but do they? The question asks about providing these services, even if they cost extra funds. How much and the impact of those services is never provided. Are all mental health services, after school programs and other programs great? Is the school the best place for these services? Respondents are given no information, making attitudes toward providing social services aspirational and uninformed at best.



CONCLUSION

PUTTING PDK (AND OTHERS) IN PERSPECTIVE

Do these topline results tell us much? No.

People like their own school, and a majority have lower opinions of others' schools. They draw their information from first-person accounts, data they may have from schools, media, and in general, their own circles.

But the real issue is “so what?” If education in this nation fails to provide a foundation for each child to be educated in the manner, and with the content needed to meet their greatest potential, live a productive life with civility and have the ability to handle all that life brings them, whether or not our neighbors, family or country agree with the way we each may choose to get there is really not the point.

We at CER believe it's time to rise above the polls and ensure that every learner at every level in this country has the opportunity to participate in the future. That doesn't require us to do what's popular, it requires us to do what's right. And giving parents the opportunity to decide how best to educate their children and giving teachers and schools the flexibility to provide the path they are trained to provide is not only right, but it works.

Dozens of data points released in just the last few weeks provide evidence that when we allow school leaders to develop their own programs and schools, free from operational constraints imposed by labor and bureaucracy, and with parents who can vote with their feet, achievement soars for all.

Most important, however, is how we put into perspective the results of PDK's survey and myriad other polls. Policies that change the landscape of public education for states and the nation may not be the most popular in the polls, but they work.

Dedicated to preserving public education as it was historically created, PDK seeks to take the public's temperature, show where support remains strong, and throw up caution signs to the public about any of those (us) who want to radically change the system. Like CER and other advocates, PDK has a point of view. Everyone has biases – advocates, researchers, media. But that doesn't mean they can't provide credible information and research worth pondering. PDK's vision is "to be the experts in cultivating great educators for tomorrow while continuing to ensure high-quality education for today." The questions in the 49th Annual Poll – and the expected answers – would not appear to help meet that mission.

A final word about poll construction and respondents – CER has conducted and studied surveys and found that results are most likely to reflect real attitudes not only when questions are descriptive but when there are actual telephonic, interviews via land lines or cell phones. The least accurate are online polls. Respondents also should be balanced by political party and ideology, gender, age, and the like. Good pollsters know how to do this. On this measure PDK does well.

