Public Support for Public Education: Is It Eroding?

by Joanne Scharer

Karen Tam

Executive Summary

How stands the public behind public schools? Does rapidly increasing enrollment in private schools, home schools, and non-traditional public schools called charter schools indicate a decline in public support for public education—or are these alternatives simply serving a segment of the student population with different needs than those who attend traditional public schools?

The Center examines enrollment trends, polling data, and local bond votes to provide insight on these questions. A look at a decade's worth of data (1990–1991 through 2000–2001) indicates that enrollment in alternatives to public schools clearly is on the rise. The number of students in private schools has increased by 68.2 percent over the course of the decade. Home school enrollment has mushroomed by 720 percent—from 4,127 students in 1990–1991 to 33,860 in 2000–2001, though it must be pointed out that home schools were not formally recognized by the state before 1988, meaning these schools started from a very low base. Charter schools, non-traditional but still taxpayer-financed and open to the public, have grown by leaps and bounds since the first schools opened their doors in 1997. Meanwhile, the traditional public schools—which serve the vast majority of North Carolina's school-age children—continued to plug along, expanding their enrollment by 19.1 percent between 1990–1991 and 2000–2001 and averaging roughly 1.76 percent mean annual growth in enrollment per year over the course of the decade. The state's school-age population (ages 5–17) increased from 1,146,543 in 1990 to 1,424,538 in 2000—or 24.2 percent. The state's overall population grew by 23 percent over the same time period to 8,049,313 residents, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

Polling data continues to show support for the public schools in North Carolina. Indeed, that support has grown stronger during the past nine years as measured by a poll conducted by the Gallup Organization and subsequent telephone surveys by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Carolina Poll. In the 1993 Gallup poll, 8 percent of respondents in

North Carolina gave the schools in their communities an "A," while 34 percent gave them a "B," and 36 percent a "C." The remaining 22 percent awarded a "D," an "F," or did not answer the question. According to the spring 1997 Carolina Poll, 38 percent of North Carolina residents felt that the education children receive in North Carolina public schools is good, 30.3 percent rated it fair, and 19.3 percent said it was poor. Only 8.5 percent gave it an excellent rating. In a similar poll conducted later that year (fall 1997) North Carolinians gave public schools in their communities slightly above average or average rankings with 14.9 percent awarding an "A," 34.4 percent giving a "B" grade, and 25 percent a "C." Of those who gave the schools below-average marks, 7.0 percent gave them a "D" and 4.6 percent an "F." An additional 14.0 percent answered don't know or declined to answer the question. The nine-year trend shows that the percentage of North Carolinians recording A's and B's in their report card for the state's public schools increased from 42 percent in 1993 to 49.3 percent in 1997 to 52.3 in 2000 and further improved to 57.8 percent in 2001.

Support for the public schools also is indicated by favorable votes for local bond referenda. Again, the news is positive for the public schools. According to the State Treasurer's office, there were 91 public school bond referenda from 1991–2001 totaling $6.6 billion in bonds for capital improvements. Of those 91 referenda, 74 percent (67 bond issues totaling about $4.7 billion) were approved by the voters. Totaling up actual yes and no votes over the decade, 61 percent of voters have cast their ballots in favor of bond referenda, while 39 percent have voted no. Thus, the public generally has said "yes" to bond votes involving the schools.

These three measures: (1) steady enrollment growth, (2) increasing support in public opinion polls, and (3) favorable outcomes in roughly three out of every four bond votes for public school construction, suggest that the public's support for public education remains resilient, despite the fusillades of critics.

Karen Tam

Enrollment continues its upward march in private schools, home schools, and charter schools. Is there erosion of public support for public education? Are students and parents voting with their feet in favor of alternatives to public schools, or are they simply choosing from a broader array of options, with the nontraditional alternatives serving a sort of niche market—a small minority of students who have needs the public schools do not adequately meet?

To address these questions, the Center chose three broad areas to examine: (1) trends in enrollment in traditional public schools, charter schools, home schools, and private schools; (2) support for public education as measured through public opinion polls; and (3) support for public education as measured by yes or no votes in local school bond referenda. If enrollment in the public schools continues to grow, if support remains steady or increases in public opinion polls, and if local school bonds pass most of the time, one can assume that support for the public schools remains healthy. A sustained decline in any of the areas, however, could mean public support for the public schools is eroding.

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Public School Enrollment

A look at public school enrollment over the last decade shows that enrollment grew by 19.1 percent from 1990–91 to 2000–2001 school year (see Table 1, p. 70).[1] That growth represents a mean annual rate of 1.76 percent per year, but still falls short of North Carolina's burgeoning growth in the number of school-age children, which stood at 24.2 percent for the decade. The potential kindergarten population (age 5) increased by roughly 20,000 (22.7 percent) from 1990–1991 to 2000–2001.[2] During the same time period, the elementary school age population (ages 6–13) grew by 28.3 percent (198,260)[3] while the high school age (ages 14–17) growth rate was slower at only 14.3 percent (59,718).[4] Overall, the state's school age population (ages 5–17) increased from 1,146,543 in 1990 to 1,424,538 in 2000—or 24.2 percent.[5] The state's overall population grew by 23 percent over the same time period to 8,049,313 residents, according to the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

But if growth in the school-age population exceeded growth in public school enrollment, there was more than enough public school enrollment growth to place a stress on the abilities of local governments across North Carolina to provide adequate

classroom space. Continued population growth in the state promises to place increasing demands on the state's public school system, though perhaps not as much as in the 1990s. The dropoff in the level of growth is expected because the children of the baby boomers—known to demographers as the "baby-boom echo" will have passed through the public schools, leaving enrollment growth at more manageable levels. The potential public school population (ages 5 through 17) is expected to increase by 13.8 percent over the next decade (by 2010) and 15.2 percent over the next two decades,[6] reaching 1.64 million by the year 2020.[7] The projected potential kindergarten population growth (age 5) is 14.3 percent over the next decade and 28.9 percent during the next two decades.[8] During the same time period, the elementary school-age population (ages 6–13) is estimated to grow by 12.8 percent through 2010 and increase by 23.3 percent by 2020, reaching nearly 1.1 million.[9] Unlike the last decade, the high school age population (ages 14–17) will increase by a little more than the younger groups as today's elementary students progress, growing 18.4 percent by 2010 and by 30.6 percent (127,598) through 2020.[10]

Private Schools

The greatest repository for school-age children who do not enroll in the traditional public schools is the traditional private school—whether religious or secular. While private schools sometimes are seen only as a haven for the privileged, that really is not the case. Indeed, private schools have a longer history in North Carolina than do the public schools—some with high tuition (in excess of $6,000 per year) and some relatively affordable (in the range of $2,500 annually). Private school enrollment has grown faster than public school enrollment over the past decade (see Table 2, p. 71), but

Table 1. Public School Enrollment in N.C., 1990–91 to 2000–01

School Year	Total Students	% Increase
1990–91	1,121,098	–
1991–92	1,131,600	0.9%
1992–93	1,146,657	1.3%
1993–94	1,165,248	1.6%
1994–95	1,191,835	2.3%
1995–96	1,219,890	2.4%
1996–97	1,247,144	2.2%
1997–98	1,274,949	2.2%
Public	*1,270,325*	–
Charter	*4,624*	–
1998–99	1,295,780	1.6%
Public	*1,287,252*	*1.3%*
Charter	*8,528*	*84.4%*
1999–00	1,316,073	1.6%
Public	*1,303,751*	*1.3%*
Charter	*12,322*	*44.5%*
2000–01	1,335,733	1.5%
Public	*1,319,850*	*1.2%*
Charter	*15,883*	*28.9%*

Source: N.C. Department of Public Instruction

Table 2. Private School Enrollment in N.C., 1990–91 to 2000–01

School Year	Total Students *	% Increase	Total Schools**	% Increase
1990–1991	53,372	–	463	–
Independent	*17,157*	–	*132*	
Religious	*36,215*	–	*331*	
1991–1992	54,186	1.5%	471	1.7%
Independent	*17,547*	*2.3%*	*142*	
Religious	*36,639*	*1.2%*	*329*	
1992–1993	58,024	7.1%	484	2.8%
Independent	*18,528*	*5.6%*	*147*	
Religious	*39,496*	*7.8%*	*337*	
1993–1994	62,300	7.4%	504	4.1%
Independent	*19,550*	*5.5%*	*153*	
Religious	*42,750*	*8.2%*	*351*	
1994–1995	68,097	9.3%	518	2.8%
Independent	*20,888*	*6.8%*	*150*	
Religious	*47,209*	*10.4%*	*368*	
1995–1996	71,599	5.1%	545	5.2%
Independent	*22,110*	*5.9%*	*169*	
Religious	*49,489*	*4.8%*	*376*	
1996–1997	77,647	8.4%	568	4.2%
Independent	*23,402*	*5.8%*	*164*	
Religious	*54,245*	*9.6%*	*404*	
1997–1998	82,001	5.6%	592	4.2%
Independent	*24,642*	*5.3%*	*176*	
Religious	*57,359*	*5.7%*	*416*	
1998–1999	84,384	2.9%	626	5.7%
Independent	*25,162*	*2.1%*	*193*	
Religious	*59,222*	*3.2%*	*433*	
1999–2000	87,406	3.6%	644	2.9%
Independent	*26,238*	*4.3%*	*187*	
Religious	*61,168*	*3.3%*	*457*	
2000–2001	89,789	2.7%	656	1.9%
Independent	*26,749*	*1.9%*	*184*	
Religious	*63,040*	*3.1%*	*472*	

* These figures do not include special school or home school data.

** These figures include special school but not home school data.

Source: N.C. Division of Non-Public Education at *www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh500.htm* and *www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh501.htm*

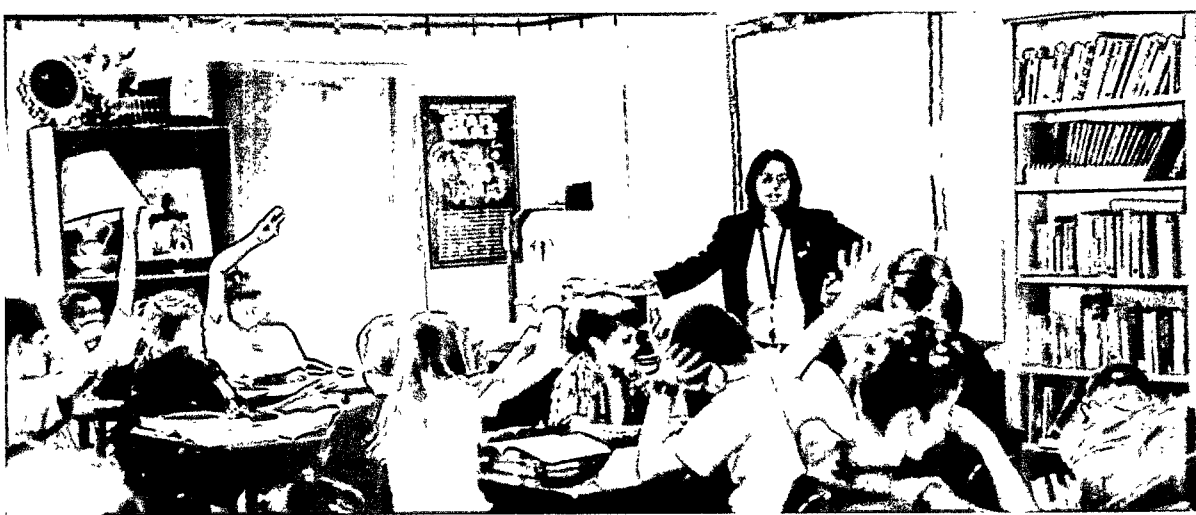
private schools start from a smaller base number of students, so it is easier to register a large percentage increase. All told, the number of students in private schools has increased by 68.2 percent over the course of the decade, from 53,372 students in 1990–91 to 89,789 students in 2000. The number of schools has increased by 41.7 percent, going from 463 in 1990–91 to 656 in 2000–2001, meaning schools have grown more numerous but also serve slightly more students per school. This increase in private school enrollment is nothing new. Over the last four decades, private school enrollment and the number of private schools has risen fairly steadily (see Figures 1 and 2, p. 73).[11]

Cost may be an issue that prevents private school enrollment from growing any faster. A 1993 national poll put the question directly: "If cost were not a factor, where would you prefer to send a child of yours: to a public school or a private school or parochial school?" Fifty-five percent of respondents chose private or parochial school, while 44 percent chose the public schools, with 1 percent registering no opinion.[12]

Should the public schools feel threatened? Maybe, maybe not, but many private schools are serving a market niche that the public schools often cannot serve due to constitutional provisions separating church and state. One of the main reasons parents choose to send their children to private schools rather than public is for the benefit of a moral or religiously rooted education. In fact, most (72 percent) of the state's K–12 private schools are religious in nature.[13]

Parents may choose to send a child to a private school for a host of reasons, some of them rooted more in the needs and performance of a particular child than any disdain for public education. "[A child] really has to be able to make their way in public schools," noted one parent interviewed for this article who has had children in both public and private schools in North Carolina. "Only really good students get attention in public schools."

Independent schools are distinct from other private schools in that they are primarily supported by tuition, charitable contributions, and endowment income rather than by church funds. Cathy



Karen Tam

"It is our American habit if we find the foundations of our educational structure unsatisfactory to add another story or wing. We find it easier to add a new study or course or kind of school than to recognize existing conditions so as to meet the need."

—JOHN DEWEY

Figure 1.
Private School Enrollment in N.C., 1961–2001

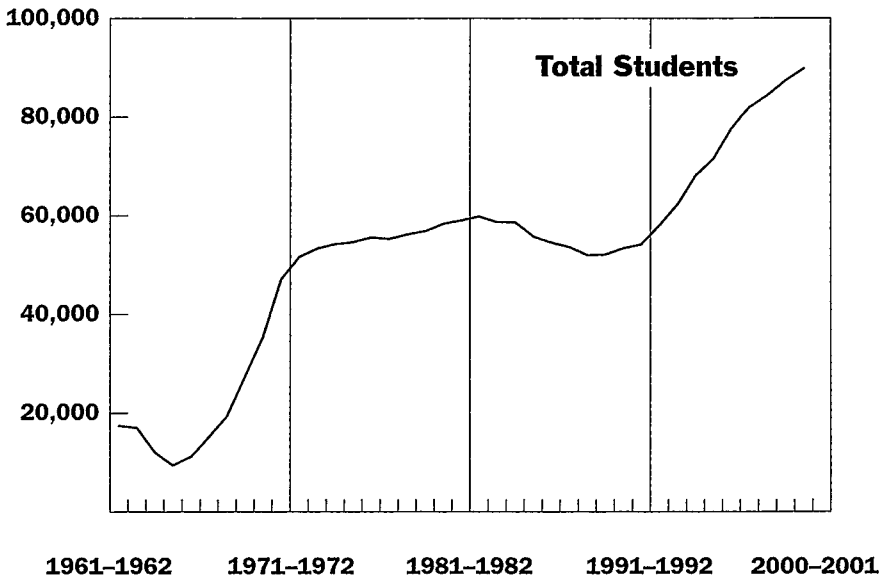
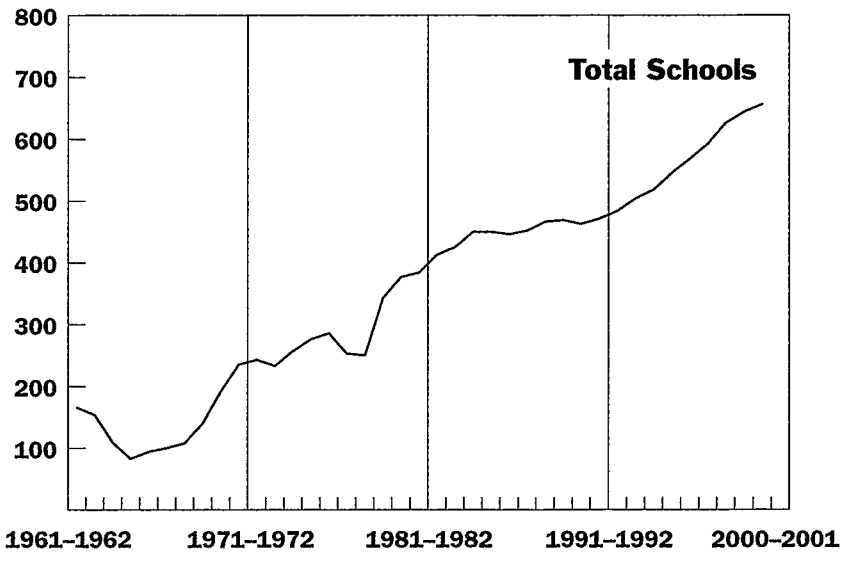


Figure 2.
Number of Private Schools in North Carolina, 1961–2001



Ten Reasons for Home Schooling

Percentage of Home Schooled Students Whose Parents Gave Each Reason, 1999

■ Can give child a better education at home	48.9%
■ Religious reasons	39.4
■ Poor learning environment at school	25.6
■ Family reasons	16.8
■ To develop character/morality	15.1
■ Object to what school teaches	12.1
■ School does not challenge child	11.6
■ Other problems with available schools	11.5
■ Student behavior problems at school	9.0
■ Child has special needs/disability	8.2

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100 because parents could give more than one response. Reasons included above are those cited by 5 percent or more of respondents.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Parent Survey of the National Household Education Surveys Program, 1999 (Parent-NHES:1999) On the Internet at *http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/quarterly/fall/q3-2.asp*

Levinson is executive director of the North Carolina Association of Independent Schools. Though a firm believer in independent schools, Levinson observes that "choosing an independent school isn't necessarily a criticism of public education."

A national poll commissioned in 1999 by the National Association of Independent Schools found that compared to public schools, independent schools are seen as offering a more personalized, customized education in an environment that is civil and controlled. Small class sizes, individualized attention, values, manners, and discipline are particular factors describing perceived differences between public and independent schools.[14] "Independent schools provide parents and students with choices in education and alternatives to what public education can offer," Levinson says. "Independent schools may meet specific needs that public schools can't."

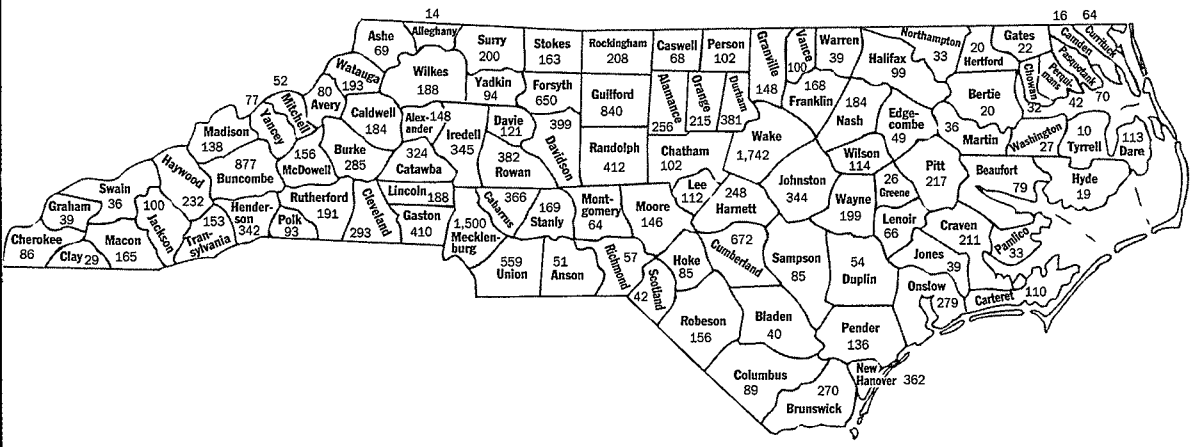
Home Schools

The term "home school" is fairly self-explanatory but the official definition according to state statutes is "a non-public school in which one or more children of not more than two families or households receive academic instruction from parents or legal guardians, or a member of either household."[15] While home schools also pre-date public schools in the state, it was not until the 1988 legislative session that the North Carolina General Assembly amended the General Statutes to allow home instruction, under certain conditions, as a means of complying with compulsory school attendance requirements.[17] The legislature's hand was forced by a 1985 N.C. Supreme Court ruling in *Delconte v. State of North Carolina* that parents had a right to home school their children as long as the school met certain legal requirements for a private school.[16]

Home school enrollment in North Carolina has increased seven-fold (720 percent) over the last decade—from 4,127 students in 1990–1991 to 33,860 students in 2000–2001, and the number of home schools has increased at about the same rate (711 percent), growing from 2,479 schools to 20,113.[18] The Division of Non-Public Education in the N.C. Department of Administration estimates the average number of students per school at 1.7 students. However, actual home school enrollment may be larger than the state estimates, because the state does not require parents to register unless a child is at least 7 years old.[19] As of 2000–2001, the number of students officially enrolled in home schools stood at 33,860 (see Table 3, p. 75).

Rod Helder, Director of the North Carolina Division of Non-Public Education says there are "an infinite number of reasons" why families choose to home school their children. Marji McIlvaine, who has home schooled her six children for 13 years—the eldest of which is now a college freshman—puts it this way: "The 'home school tent' is a large one. Even though the choice to educate at home is held in common, the method, reasons, and curriculum, vary widely," says McIlvaine. "There are so many different approaches, so many different families, so many different home schools. I suspect that for most of us who continue to educate at home, the strengths of home education become the main reason along the way, no matter how the choice to try home schooling began."

Figure 3.
Number of Home Schools in N.C. by County, 2000–2001



Source: N.C. Division of Non-Public Education at *http://www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh201.htm* and *http://www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh202.htm*

Table 3. Home School Enrollment in N.C., 1990–91 To 2000–01*

School Year	Total Students	Percent Increase	Total Schools	Percent Increase	Average Students Per School
1990–1991	4,127		2,479		1.7
1991–1992	5,556	34.6%	3,315	33.7%	1.7
1992–1993	6,947	25.0%	4,138	24.8%	1.7
1993–1994	8,927	28.5%	5,145	24.3%	1.7
1994–1995	11,222	25.7%	6,683	29.9%	1.7
1995–1996	13,801	23.0%	8,171	22.3%	1.7
1996–1997	15,785	14.4%	9,381	14.8%	1.7
1997–1998	18,415	16.7%	10,925	16.5%	1.7
1998–1999	21,500	16.8%	12,733	16.5%	1.7
1999–2000	27,978	30.1%	16,623	30.6%	1.7
2000–2001	33,860	21.0%	20,113	33.7%	1.7

* The total number of students is an approximation based on an estimate of 1.7 students per registered home school. Total number of schools is the actual number of home schools registered with the state.

Source: N.C. Division of Non-Public Education at *http://www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh201.htm* and *http://www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh202.htm*

To Open a Home School in North Carolina, Parents or Guardians Must:

- Send to the Division of Non-Public Education in the N.C. Department of Administration a notice of intent to operate a school. The notice must include the name or address of the school along with the name of the school's owner and chief administrator;
- Hold at least a high school diploma or its equivalent;
- Elect to operate under either Part I or Part II of Article 39 of the North Carolina General Statutes as a religious or a non-religious school;
- Hold at least a high school diploma or its equivalent;
- Operate the school on a regular schedule, excluding reasonable holidays and vacations, at least nine calendar months of the year;
- Maintain at the school disease immunization records and attendance records for each student;
- Have a nationally recognized standardized achievement test administered annually for each student. The test must involve the subject areas of English grammar, reading, spelling, and mathematics. Records of the test results must be retained at the school for at least one year and made available to the Division of Non-Public Education when requested;
- Notify the Division of Non-Public Education when the school is no longer in operation.

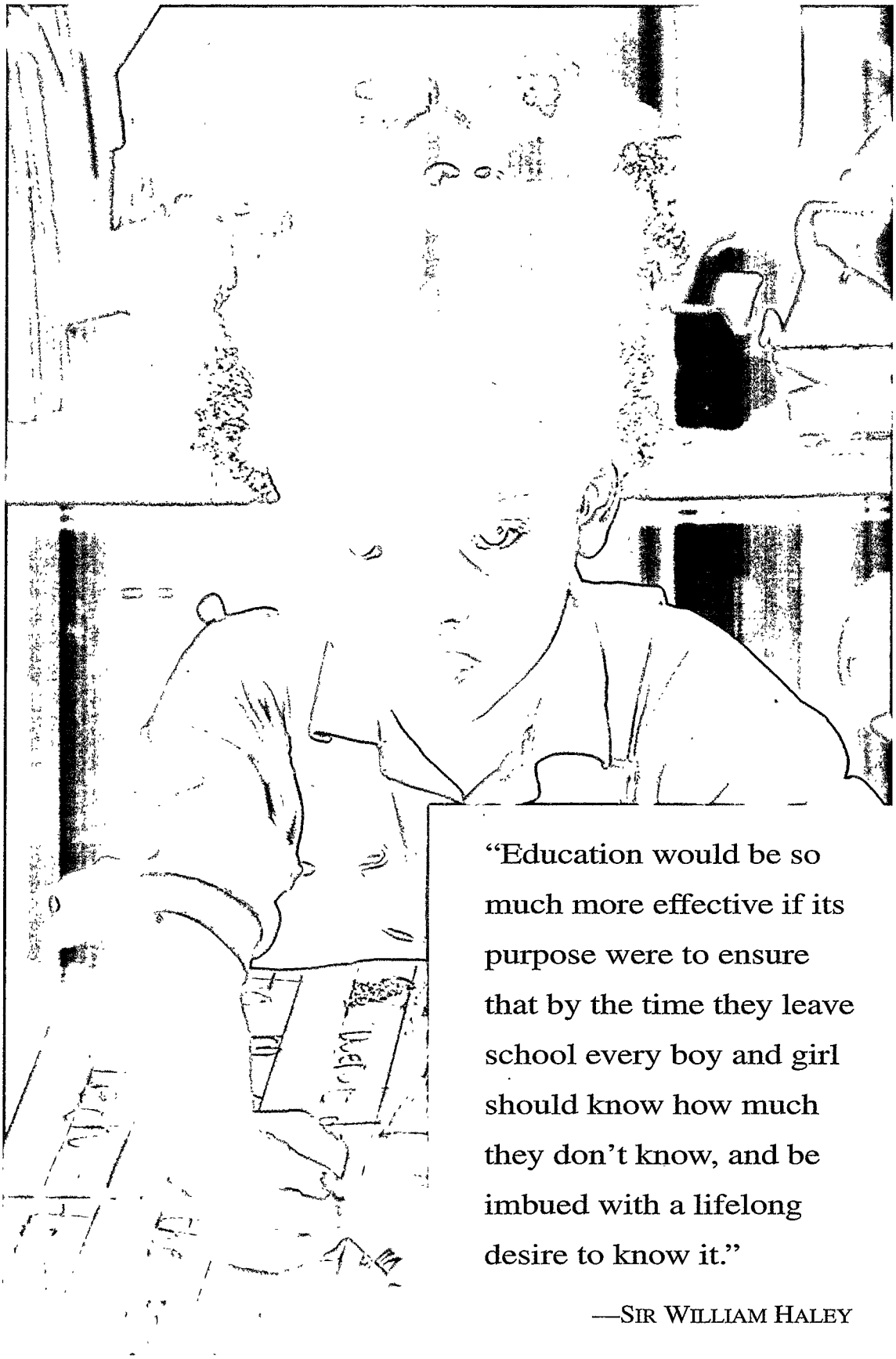
For more on home schooling requirements in North Carolina, contact:

N.C. Department of Administration
Division of Non-Public Education
Rod Helder, Director
1309 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27699-1309
(919) 733-4276
Web site: *www.ncdnpe.org*
or,

North Carolinians for Home Education
Jeff Townsend, President
419 N Boylan Avenue
Raleigh NC 27603-1211
(919) 834-6243
Fax (919) 834-6241
e-mail: *nche@mindspring.com*
Web site: *http://www.nche.com*

Source: Reprinted from the North Carolina Division of Non-Public Education Home School Information Packet. Available on the web at *www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh103.htm*

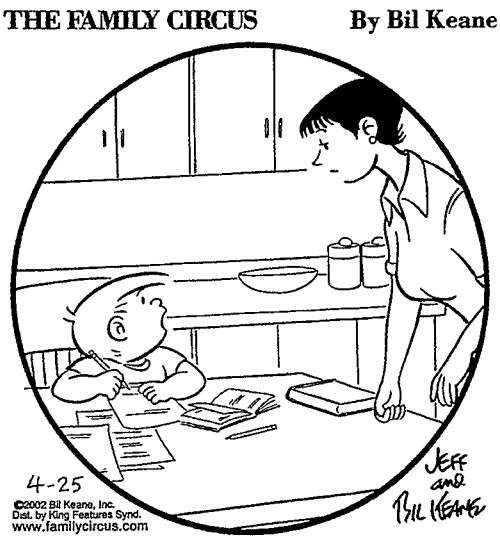
Helder believes that the increase in home school enrollment is probably a result of children leaving both public *and* private schools. Still, Helder does speculate that a "good percentage are particularly coming out of public schools," largely leaving private schools to avoid tuition or choosing home school to begin with because there is no private school in the area. In addition, the fact that 70.2 percent of the home schools in the state identify themselves as religious in nature when registering with the state[20] suggests that home schooling families choose that option because of the lack of religious education in the public school curriculum. As is the case with private schools, the fact that students are leaving public schools to continue their education at home does not automatically imply a condemnation of public education. "There are many reasons people choose to home school their children," says Jeff Townsend, President of North Carolinians for Home Education. "Parents do not choose to teach their children at home as a show of criticism of public education. People primarily choose to



"Education would be so much more effective if its purpose were to ensure that by the time they leave school every boy and girl should know how much they don't know, and be imbued with a lifelong desire to know it."

—SIR WILLIAM HALEY

Karen Tam



"If home-schooled kids mess up, can they be expelled from the family?"

teach their children at home because it works. However, home schooling is not for everyone. It takes a tremendous amount of dedication and sacrifice to teach your child at home."

Some home school families, however, are clearly dissatisfied with the public schools. Such is the case for Wendy Pace, a home schooler of two who lives in Western North Carolina. "We tried public school in what is considered one of the best public schools around. We were so frustrated and disappointed," says Pace. "Our public schools have declined in a way that I can't imagine them recovering. As support declines and parents decide that they must take a stand (home school or private school), it is going to become harder for the public school system to survive. Therefore, I believe that the level of care that the students are getting will decline even more. It is so unfortunate that we have come to this, but for too many years we have forgotten all that is important—our children."

Charter Schools

Charter schools represent an interesting case because they truly are public schools, though nontraditional in the way they operate and select students. Charter schools are nonprofit corporations run by boards of directors that have significant autonomy in determining how the schools operate.[21] In 1996, the General Assembly passed legislation to allow for charter schools in North Carolina. The legislation set a cap of 100 charter schools, which was reached in February of 2002.[22] Some state leaders and policymakers would like to see that cap raised or even eliminated. Legislation introduced during the 2001 legislative session would have raised the cap from 100 to 135.[23] There were also bills during the session that would have eliminated the cap on charter schools entirely.[24]

While charter schools have increased flexibility and freedom from various public school policies, they are still considered public schools because they receive public funds—the same per-student funding from the state that traditional public schools receive (with the exception of money for school construction), and they are still subject to state rules regarding safety and health requirements, performance standards through state accountability testing of students, special education regulations, and open admissions.[25] Charter school enrollment has increased by 243 percent since the first schools opened their doors in North Carolina during the 1997–1998 school year. Since they start from a base of zero students, the impressive growth rate is somewhat misleading. Charters have now reached their statutory cap of 100 schools. Unless and until expansion occurs, the growth rate will inevitably tail off. As of 2000–2001, the number of students in charter schools stood at 15,883.

Since 1997, when charter school approvals began, a total of 23 charter schools have closed or failed to open either because they voluntarily relinquished their charter, or their charter was revoked.[26] Of the schools that closed, most did so for financial reasons. Organizational difficulties in starting a new school also play a strong role in charter school failure. However, most schools continue to thrive in terms of student demand, with some maintaining impressive waiting lists. Although some may see the push for charter schools as indicative of discontent with traditional public education, the phenomenon can be more accurately described as a push for a different kind of public education—one featuring smaller schools, fewer students per teacher, greater parental involvement, and the opportunity to try out new and different things in the classroom (See "The Charter Experience in North Carolina," pp. 2–64, for a thorough discussion and evaluation of the charter school movement in North Carolina).

Sadie Jordan, President of the North Carolina Association of Charter Schools and former principal at Village Charter School in Chapel Hill, believes that parents choosing to send their child to a charter school isn't necessarily an affront to the public school system but rather a choice for "a dif-

ferent environment that empowers change in the process used in educating their child." These parents "want their tax dollars to be used in the classroom educating their children," Jordan says. As to whether public support for the public schools is diminishing, Jordan contends that the public is withholding support for the current design of public education—not support for public education itself.

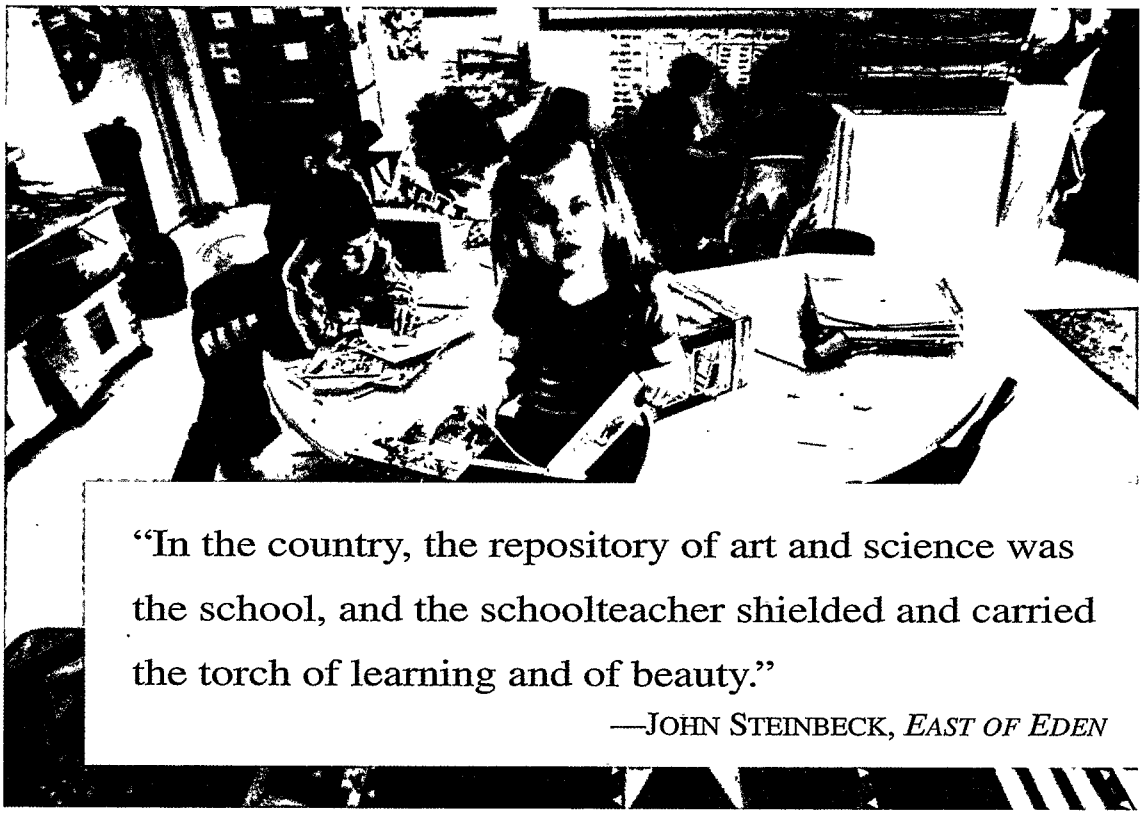
Jordan, while principal of Village Charter, was also affiliated with FREE (Financial Reform for Excellence in Education), the founder of Village Charter and five other charter schools in the Triangle. She believes that a key point in the public support debate is that North Carolinians want to know if the money spent on education is producing a good return on the investment. "Are we spending money effectively? What are we getting for our current financial commitment? How do we improve the bottom line?" asks Jordan.

Public Support

The notion of public support for public education spans a continuum ranging from funding (tax dollars) to active parental and community support. For some, supporting public education means spending more money. "The reason our educational system is poor and our children so often uneducated is that we do not wish to pay for quality education," says Bob Jacobson of Durham. "We'd rather complain about education while we shop at the mall," Jacobson adds.[27]

To others, support for public education is about encouragement, confidence, and parental and community involvement. The state's First in America effort, issued in 1999 by then-Governor James B. Hunt, challenged citizens of the state to commit to ambitious goals in education. "By the year 2010, North Carolina will build the best system of public schools of any state in America," said Hunt. "By the end of the first decade of the 21st century, we will be first in education."[28] The goal includes an objective of "Strong family, business, and community support" where "every family [is] involved in their child's learning" and "every community [is] involved in children's learning."[29] The inaugural First in America 2000 Report gave the state a "B-" in this category. In 2001, the state showed improvement earning a "B" for strong family, business, and community support.[30] *—continues on page 84*

Karen Tam



"In the country, the repository of art and science was the school, and the schoolteacher shielded and carried the torch of learning and of beauty."

—JOHN STEINBECK, *EAST OF EDEN*

Karen Tam

—continued from page 79

What Do the Polls Say?

The enrollment increases in the alternatives to traditional public schools may suggest that North Carolinians are "voting with their feet" when it comes to public education, but the public schools still educate more than 90 percent of North Carolina's students. Statewide polling data indicate that support for the public schools remains steady and even is increasing. (See "What Do North Carolinians Think about North Carolina Public Schools?" p. 86, for sample size, question wording, and margin of error for these and other polls). Support has gotten stronger during the past nine years as measured by a poll conducted by the Gallup Organization and subsequent telephone surveys by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Carolina Poll. In the 1993 Gallup poll, 8 percent of respondents gave the schools in their communities an "A," while 34 percent gave them a "B," and 36 percent a "C." The remaining 22 percent awarded a "D," an "F," or did not answer the question.

According to the spring 1997 Carolina Poll,[31] 38 percent of North Carolina residents felt that the education children receive in North Carolina public schools is good, 30.3 percent rated it fair, and 19.3 percent said it was poor. Only 8.5 percent gave it an excellent rating. In a similar poll conducted later that year (fall 1997) North Carolinians gave public schools in their communities slightly above average or average rankings with 14.9 percent awarding an "A," 34.4 percent giving a "B" grade, and 25 percent a "C." The more recent grades given to public schools show that the percentage of North Carolinians recording A's and B's in their report card for the state's public schools increased from 42 percent in 1993 to 49.3 percent in 1997 to 52.3 in 2000 and further improved to 57.8 percent in 2001.

In response to this most recent poll, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Michael Ward called it another "validation" that North Carolinians are noticing the school improvements that have been called a model for the nation. "Two U.S. Presidents, *Education Week*, the National Education Goals Panel, and many others have highly rated our improvement efforts. But, what matters most is what our own citizens think about public schools," says Ward. "I'm so pleased to see that more and more parents and others give good grades to our schools. We want to continue to see progress in the perceptions of public schools."[32]

Some education leaders, including Colleen Borst, Executive Director of the N.C. Association

of Educators (NCAE), agree that the state's public school system is meriting higher levels of support. "Approval ratings have gone in a positive direction in the last five years," Borst says. "Across North Carolina, most communities are very proud of their schools."

Still, Borst also recognizes and acknowledges the critics of the state's education efforts. "Is there room for improvement? Absolutely. Is it abysmal? Absolutely not," Borst remarks. "There is great hope and energy in the state around our schools." Borst's view is supported by spring 2000 poll numbers showing that 62.1 percent of North Carolinians believe that to improve the public school system, the focus should be on reforming the existing system.[33] *—continues on page 89*

Support for the Public Schools in Polls: North Carolina Versus the Nation

For the much of the past decade, polling organizations in the state and nation have probed the public mind in an effort to gauge support for the public schools. The typical format is to have respondents grade the schools, much as respondents were graded by their teachers in grade school and beyond. A standard question is this: "Students are often are given the grades A, B, C, D, and Fail to denote the quality of their work. Suppose the public schools, themselves, in this community, were graded in the same way. What grade would you give the schools here?"

How do North Carolina residents grade their schools compared to the rest of the nation? The results of polls taken in the same year statewide and nationally make possible a direct comparison.

As the numbers below indicate, North Carolina trailed the nation in 1993, with 47 percent of poll respondents giving their local public schools A's and B's nationally, compared to 44 percent at the state level. But by 1997, as the state became increasingly focused on public school reform, North Carolina's numbers had surpassed those of the nation as a whole, with 49 percent of N.C. respondents giving A's and B's compared to 46 percent nationally. The gap widened in 2000, with 52 percent of North Carolina respondents awarding A's and B's, compared to 47 percent nationally. Thus, the poll numbers support the notion that North Carolinians think more of their public schools than does the nation as a whole.

—Mike McLaughlin

	1993		1997		2000	
	A's&B's	**C,D,F**	**A's&B's**	**C,D,F**	**A's&B's**	**C,D,F**
National answer (%)	**47**	46	46	49	47	46
N.C. answer (%)	44	52	**49**	37	**52**	38

Bold type indicates higher percentage when respondents awarding an A or B are combined.

Source: 1993 national data from the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa as reported in "Report Card for the Nation's Schools," *The Polling Report,* Washington, D.C., Oct. 11, 1993, p. 2. National data for 1997 and 2000 also are reprinted from *The Polling Report* (Sept. 1997, p. 1, Oct. 21, 200, p. 1. North Carolina data were taken from data archives at the University of North Carolina's Institute for Research in Social Science. See "What Do Polls Show North Carolinians Think about North Carolina Public Schools?" p. 86, for a more detailed description of these in-state polls.

Other state leaders point out that public education has remained atop the list of hot button issues for a decade or more, showing the depth and breadth of public interest in the public schools. "Education has sustained a top priority over the last decade which is unheard of in public policy circles," says John Dornan, Executive Director of the Public School Forum of North Carolina, an independent nonprofit devoted to strengthening schools and maintaining consistent support for school improvement. "The real challenge in the next decade is, can we sustain this long enough to finish the job?"

With respect to parents choosing other options for their children's education, Dornan believes that "the public is ahead of educators and policymakers" on a number of issues. Speaking primarily about charter schools, Dornan says that one of the reasons for enrollment growth in schooling alternatives is the concern that traditional public schools are "myopically focused on test scores" as encompassed in the state ABC program (**A**ccountability in the **B**asics with local **C**ontrol) for public school improvement. "I'm convinced that [the focus on test scores] is one of the reasons there has been a measurable upswing in people looking for different options," Dornan says.

On the national level, the public schools fare less well in public opinion polling than is the case in North Carolina. Although many people voice initial support for what their local schools are doing, they become much more critical upon further questioning. The prevailing view is that public education as a whole is in bad shape and renewed efforts are needed to fix it. Most people think private schools do better than public schools in important areas such as safety, order, academic standards and class size.[34] According to Public Agenda, a nonpartisan, nonprofit public opinion research and citizen education organization based in New York City, in 1973, 58 percent of Americans said they had "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the public schools. This number fell to 49 percent in 1988 and dropped further to 36 percent in 1999.[35] Still, while most Americans (61 percent) say they are somewhat dissatisfied (40 percent) or completely dissatisfied (21 percent) with the quality of education in the U.S., the numbers are reversed when parents are asked about the local public schools their own children attend. Here, the vast majority are at least somewhat satisfied (31 percent completely satisfied and 47 percent somewhat satisfied).[36] Likewise, most Americans (64 percent) say the public school system needs major changes, but only a third (34%) say they support finding an alternative.[37]

Karen Tam

Overall, it seems that most Americans want positive and compelling action to improve public schools, but there is little agreement about what the problem is, or which alternative is most promising.[38]

What Have the Voters Said at the Polls Through Bond Referenda?

An indirect proxy or "poll" that may indicate the level of public support for public education is school bond referenda. Support for school bonds at least theoretically illustrates the public's commitment to improve public education. According to the State Treasurer's office, there were 91 public school bond referenda in North Carolina from 1991–2001 totaling $6.6 billion in bonds for capital improvements.[39] Of those 91 referenda, 74 percent (67 bond issues totaling $4.7 billion) were approved by the voters (see Table 4). The largest number of referenda in any year during that time period was 11 in both 1994 and 1997. Six of the 11 (55 percent) in 1994 were defeated while only two were defeated in 1997 (18 percent). The 1994 results seem to reflect a groundswell of anti-tax, anti-government sentiment that swept unprecedented numbers of Republicans into state and local offices in North Carolina (See Mebane Rash Whitman, "The Evolution of Party Politics: The March of the GOP Continues in North Carolina," *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 16, No. 2, September 1995, pp. 81–97 for more on this topic). However, the public sentiment against spending for school construction soon turned. The

—continues on page 93

Table 4. Public School Bond Referenda in N.C., 1991–2001

		Amount of Bond		Voting Margin			
County	Election Date	Issue Approved	Issue Defeated	For	%	Against	%
Durham	3/12/1991	$125,000,000		11,423	64.9%	6,170	35.1%
Pender	3/26/1991		$19,900,000	1,504	36.0%	2,678	64.0%
Surry	5/28/1991	$30,000,000		3,187	60.8%	2,056	39.2%
Mecklenburg	11/5/1991	$86,000,000		52,692	71.2%	21,340	28.8%
Rowan	11/5/1991		$49,200,000	8,146	47.9%	8,844	52.1%
Alamance	5/5/1992	$36,000,000		10,033	60.8%	6,467	39.2%
Buncombe	5/5/1992	$6,900,000		7,665	52.9%	6,814	47.1%
Cumberland	5/5/1992	$50,000,000		18,216	62.6%	10,869	37.4%
Davidson	5/5/1992	$26,000,000		10,315	75.5%	3,339	24.5%
Duplin	5/5/1992		$22,500,000	2,336	37.9%	3,828	62.1%
Watauga (Elem.)	9/22/1992	$18,700,000		3,775	55.2%	3,064	44.8%
Watauga (H.S.)	9/22/1992	$5,300,000		3,858	53.5%	3,351	46.5%
Gaston	11/3/1992	$59,500,000		32,123	58.1%	23,197	41.9%
Mecklenburg	11/3/1992		$15,000,000	76,929	50.0%	77,010	50.0%
Orange	11/3/1992	$52,000,000		26,005	58.4%	18,509	41.6%
Catawba	3/16/1993	$33,117,000		2,883	66.4%	1,462	33.6%
Buncombe	4/27/1993	$34,500,000		11,461	64.5%	6,295	35.5%
Wake	6/8/1993	$200,000,000		25,985	56.4%	20,077	43.6%
Stanly	8/31/1993		$22,000,000	2,301	17.5%	10,813	82.5%
Currituck	11/2/1993	$16,000,000		1,938	63.4%	1,120	36.6%
Iredell	11/2/1993		$36,285,000	8,154	44.8%	10,043	55.2%
Madison	11/2/1993		$10,200,000	1,224	37.4%	2,045	62.6%
Mecklenburg	11/2/1993	$192,000,000		45,789	51.4%	43,273	48.6%
Rowan	11/2/1993	$44,000,000		11,981	60.0%	7,996	40.0%
Chatham	12/15/1993	$15,000,000		1,281	69.9%	551	30.1%
New Hanover	3/8/1994	$39,900,000		7,872	56.3%	6,100	43.7%
Lincoln	3/29/1994	$20,100,000		2,025	61.5%	1,269	38.5%
Cabarrus	5/3/1994		$81,000,000	11,199	43.2%	14,703	56.8%
Guilford	5/3/1994		$198,000,000	17,208	33.7%	33,869	66.3%
Haywood	5/3/1994		$23,075,000	4,096	33.7%	8,061	66.3%
Alleghany	8/9/1994		$4,410,000	1,201	47.5%	1,326	52.5%
Nash	9/13/1994		$35,000,000	2,543	15.5%	13,813	84.5%

Table 4. Public School Bond Referenda in N.C., 1991–2001, *continued*

		Amount of Bond		Voting Margin			
County	Election Date	Issue Approved	Issue Defeated	For	%	Against	%
Cherokee	9/19/1994		$11,000,000	1,079	17.9%	4,959	82.1%
Carteret	11/8/1994	$29,000,000		9,609	61.4%	6,032	38.6%
Onslow	11/8/1994	$40,000,000		9,269	63.5%	5,322	36.5%
Union	11/8/1994	$18,000,000		9,449	54.8%	7,783	45.2%
Pitt	3/14/1995		$31,800,000	5,305	35.6%	9,594	64.4%
Chatham	5/23/1995	$5,300,000		1,730	72.1%	671	27.9%
Mecklenburg	5/30/1995		$304,267,000	30,664	49.0%	31,969	51.0%
Craven	11/7/1995	$17,050,000		4,964	58.0%	3,594	42.0%
Davie	11/7/1995	$7,635,000		2,489	52.9%	2,219	47.1%
Forsyth	11/7/1995	$94,000,000		24,334	69.9%	10,463	30.1%
Johnston	11/7/1995	$50,000,000		8,034	66.5%	4,056	33.5%
Mecklenburg	11/7/1995	$217,000,000		70,184	71.5%	27,940	28.5%
Cabarrus	5/7/1996	$49,000,000		12,915	64.8%	7,019	35.2%
Iredell	5/7/1996	$22,180,000		9,336	71.8%	3,658	28.2%
Lee	5/7/1996	$25,000,000		4,212	67.8%	1,999	32.2%
Pender	5/7/1996	$25,000,000		3,481	64.8%	1,894	35.2%
Wake	6/4/1996	$250,000,000		33,745	79.2%	8,854	20.8%
Franklin	8/27/1996	$17,000,000		2,834	78.8%	762	21.2%
Stokes	9/7/1996	$25,000,000		2,543	65.1%	1,364	34.9%
Scotland	11/5/1996	$18,600,000		4,578	79.7%	1,163	20.3%
Caldwell	2/4/1997	$13,910,000		2,547	55.8%	2,016	44.2%
Catawba	3/11/1997	$50,000,000		3,334	59.5%	2,274	40.5%
Dare	5/20/1997		$59,500,000	2,176	22.2%	7,637	77.8%
Cumberland	10/7/1997	$98,000,000		16,295	56.0%	12,820	44.0%
Alamance	11/4/1997	$25,000,000		9,367	67.3%	4,561	32.7%
Mecklenburg	11/4/1997	$415,000,000		62,256	73.0%	23,005	27.0%
Moore	11/4/1997	$25,000,000		8,738	68.7%	3,990	31.3%
New Hanover	11/4/1997	$125,000,000		13,743	57.1%	10,337	42.9%
Orange	11/4/1997	$47,000,000		9,589	58.4%	6,823	41.6%
Transylvania	11/4/1997	$24,300,000		3,606	57.9%	2,618	42.1%
Henderson	11/18/1997		$46,500,000	5,107	29.7%	12,074	70.3%
Person	2/10/1998		$18,525,000	1,541	40.6%	2,254	59.4%

—continues

Table 4. Public School Bond Referenda in N.C., 1991–2001, *continued*

		Amount of Bond		Voting Margin			
County	**Election Date**	**Issue Approved**	**Issue Defeated**	**For**	**%**	**Against**	**%**
Stanly	5/5/1998		$38,000,000	5,690	45.2%	6,897	54.8%
Bladen	9/15/1998	$25,000,000		2,793	53.8%	2,399	46.2%
Granville	11/3/1998	$18,700,000		7,233	85.4%	1,241	14.6%
Wilkes	11/3/1998		$28,000,000	6,458	35.3%	11,831	64.7%
Union	11/3/1998	$52,700,000		19,997	72.0%	7,782	28.0%
Caswell	5/4/1999	$4,500,000		1,200	72.7%	450	27.3%
Wake	6/8/1999		$650,000,000	31,374	34.6%	59,297	65.4%
Buncombe	10/5/1999	$45,000,000		14,326	73.3%	5,213	26.7%
Brunswick	11/2/1999	$83,500,000		6,552	54.3%	5,504	45.7%
Craven	11/2/1999		$25,000,000	4,381	46.0%	5,140	54.0%
Johnston	11/2/1999	$80,000,000		8,004	75.4%	2,610	24.6%
Guilford	5/2/2000	$200,000,000		38,159	59.5%	26,016	40.5%
Lee	5/2/2000	$25,700,000		23,188	77.8%	6,610	22.2%
Stanly	5/2/2000	$26,000,000		7,385	66.9%	3,650	33.1%
Lincoln	5/2/2000	$36,000,000		6,732	72.9%	2,507	27.1%
Wake	11/7/2000	$500,000,000		200,932	77.9%	56,999	22.1%
Mecklenburg	11/7/2000	$275,500,000		173,002	70.5%	72,372	29.5%
Union	11/7/2000	$55,000,000		28,054	66.1%	14,388	33.9%
Catawba	3/20/2001		$72,000,000	4,285	39.9%	6,458	60.1%
Carteret	3/20/2001		$33,500,000	3,611	40.3%	5,340	59.7%
Durham	11/6/2001	$51,800,000		23,604	65.2%	12,612	34.8%
Gaston	11/6/2001	$89,000,000		11,690	69.3%	5,169	30.7%
Craven	11/6/2001	$28,000,000		6,963	63.6%	3,993	36.4%
Wilson	11/6/2001	$21,000,000		4,521	61.3%	2,852	38.7%
Johnston	11/6/2001	$75,000,000		7,874	77.9%	2,239	22.1%
Forsyth	11/6/2001	$150,000,000		29,564	67.3%	14,346	32.7%
Orange	11/6/2001	$47,000,000		11,868	59.2%	8,179	40.8%
Totals		***$4,712,892,000***	***$1,834,662,000***	***1,505,841***	***61%***	***964,170***	***39%***

Source: N.C. Department of State Treasurer, State and Local Government Finance Division

most favorable years for school bond referenda were in 1996 and 2000 when all of the referenda passed. Phil Kirk, chair of the State Board of Education and President of North Carolina Citizens for Business and Industry—the statewide chamber of commerce, observes that 2001 also was a strong year for school bonds. "In 2001 at the height of the most recent recession, seven of nine bond referendums passed, most by large margins, and several passed in conservative counties where tax increases were promised," says Kirk.

In total, 61 percent of voters have cast their ballots in favor of bond referenda over the 10-year period, while 39 percent have voted no. Thus, the public generally has said yes to bond votes involving the schools. School bond funds can only be used for construction and renovation, and cannot be used for teacher salaries and program funding. However, support for the school building can in some ways be seen as support for the school and its programs.

Conclusion

While enrollment increases in private schools, home schools, and charter schools are striking, the public as a whole still stands behind North Carolina's public schools. Consider these facts: (1) Public school enrollment has increased by a mean annual percentage of roughly 1.76 percent over the course of the last decade—a healthy rate of growth that is about as much as some school systems can accommodate. (2) Support for the public schools in North Carolina—as measured by public opinion polls, actually has increased over the past nine years. (3) The public has overwhelmingly endorsed local school bond issues over the course of the decade.

These three measures of support—all of which can be interpreted favorably for the public schools, suggest that the public's support for public education remains resilient, despite the fusillades of critics. However, it must also be observed that the public is not fully satisfied, and that many students have no practical alternative to the public schools due to the expense of a private education. Since the 1981 publication of the landmark study, *A Nation at Risk*, state-level politicians have found no campaign issue that resonates with the voters more than reform of the public schools. Substitute the word "improve" for reform, and it becomes clear that this is what the voters care about—not dismantling the public schools but fixing and improving them. It appears that increasing enrollment in non-public school alternatives represents growing niche markets as parents seek what is best for the individual child—not the death throes of public education.

Karen Tam

FOOTNOTES

[1] North Carolina Public Schools Statistical Profile 2001, N.C. Department of Public Instruction, Raleigh, N.C., p. 5, and the N.C. Department of Public Instruction Division of Financial and Business Services.

[2] County/State Population Estimates, April 1990 and April 2000, Age Groups-Total, State Data Center, Raleigh, N.C. at *demog.state.nc.us/demog/ca90sage.html* and *demog.state.nc.us/demog/cn00sage.html.* Note: The kindergarten age population starting in 1990 was 88,353 and in 2000 was 108,370.

[3] *Ibid.* Note: The elementary age population was 700,970 in 1990 and 899,230 in the 2000.

[4] *Ibid.* Note: The high school population was 357,220 in 1990 and 416,938 in 2000. County/State population projects, Statewide trends, "Past and Expected Trends," State Data Center, Raleigh, N.C., at *demog.state.nc.us/demog/extrends.html*

[5] State Data Center at *demog.state.nc.us/demog/ca90sage.html* and *demog.state.nc.us/demog/cn00sage.html.* Note: The school-age population grew from 1,146,543 in 1990 to 1,424,538 in 2000.

[6] The potential school-age population is projected to grow by 196,130 from 2000 to 2010 and by 216,558 from 2000 to 2020.

[7] County State Population Projections, Age Groups-Total April 2000, 2010 and 2020, State Data Center, Raleigh N.C. at *demog.state.nc.us/demog/cn00sage.html, demog.state.nc.us/demog/ca10sage.html,* and *demog.state.nc.us/demog/ca20sage.html*

[8] The potential kindergarten population is projected to grow by 15,461 from 2000 to 2010 and by 31,265 from 2000 to 2020. See note 7 above.

[9] The potential elementary age population is projected to grow by 114,087 from 2000 to 2010 and by 207,213 from 2000 to 2020. See note 7 above.

[10] The potential high school population is projected to grow by 76,582 from 2000 (416,938) to 2010 and by 127,598 from 2000 to 2020 (544,563). See note 7 above.

[11] See "Private School Statewide Statistical History," N.C. Division of Non-Public Education at *www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh501.htm* above. Note: The first state non-public school office was established in 1961.

[12] The Gallup/*USA Today*/CNN Poll, Jan. 8–11, 1993, 1000 respondents nationwide.

[13] "N.C. Private Schools Statewide Classified By Type 2000–2001 School Term," N.C. Division of Non-Public Education at *www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh550.htm*

[14] "National Public Opinion Poll on Perceptions of Independent Schools," National Association of Independent Schools, Washington, D.C. December 2001, p. 5. The national telephone survey of 751 adults was conducted from April 30, 1999, through May 10, 1999, and yielded a margin of sampling error of 3.7 percent.

[15] N.C. General Statute 115C-563.

[16] The N.C. Center for Public Policy Research looked at home schooling in an article by Katherine White, "When Is a School a School?" *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 8, No. 1, September 1985, pp. 82–83.

[17] Chapter 891 of the 1988 N.C. Session Laws, codified as N.C.G.S. 115C-563.

[18] N.C. Division of Non-Public Education at *www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh201.htm* and *www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh202.htm.*

[19] T. Keung Hui, "More teachers answer to 'Mom,' 'Dad,'" *The News and Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., July 28, 2001, p. A1.

[20] "N.C. Home School Estimated Statewide Enrollment By Type 2000–01 School Term," N.C. Division of Non-Public Education, Raleigh, N.C. at *www.doa.state.nc.us/dnpe/hhh226.htm.*

[21] See S.D. Williams and Joanne Scharer, "Random Acts of Public School Reform: Will New Elections and Budgets Undo Current Reform Again?" *North Carolina Insight*, Vol. 19, Nos. 1–2, October 2000, pp. 81–84

[22] "State Board Approves Three New Charter Schools; 100-Cap Limit Met" N.C. Department of Public Instruction press release, February 7, 2002, p.1 at *www.ncpublicschools.org/news/01-02/020702b.html*

[23] Senate Bill 867 of the 2001 N.C. Legislative Session.

[24] Senate Bill 23, House Bill 25, House Bill 26, and House Bill 29 of the 2001 N.C. Legislative Session.

[25] Williams and Scharer, note 21 above, p. 81.

[26] See Table 3. N.C. Charter Schools That Have Closed, 1997–Present, p. 31, for a complete list of schools that have closed or have never opened.

[27] Letter to the Editor, *The News and Observer*, Raleigh, N.C., March 3, 2002, p. 28A.

[28] "History of the First in America Project," North Carolina Education Research Council, Raleigh, N.C., p. 1 at *www.firstinamerica.northcarolina.edu/reports/FIA%20History.pdf.*

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 2.

[30] "2001 First in America Annual Report Executive Summary" North Carolina Education Research Council, Raleigh, N.C., p. 1 at *www.firstinamerica.northcarolina.edu/reports/Executive%20Sum.pdf.*

[31] The Carolina Poll is a telephone survey of North Carolinians covering a variety of topics. It is conducted twice a year (spring and fall) by the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. See *www.irss.unc.edu/irss/researchdesservices/resdesservices.html#Carolina%20Poll.* For more details on this poll, including sample size, margin of error, and dates the poll was taken, see "What Do Polls Show North Carolinians Think About North Carolina Public Schools?" p. 86.

[32] "Carolina Poll Finds More Citizens Satisfied with Public Schools," N.C. Department of Public Instruction Press Release, Raleigh N.C., November 1, 2001, p. 1 at *www.ncpublicschools.org/news/00-01/110101.html.* For more details on this poll, including sample size, margin of error, and dates the poll was taken, see "What Do Polls Show North Carolinians Think About North Carolina Public Schools?" p. 86.

[33] "Carolina Poll," Spring 2000, UNC School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Chapel Hill N.C., p. 4. See *www.irss.unc.edu/irss/researchdesservices/researchdeslinks/cpollreports.htm.* For more details on this poll, including sample size, margin of error, and dates the poll was taken, see "What Do Polls Show North Carolinians Think About North Carolina Public Schools?" p. 86.

[34] "Overview: The Issue at a Glance" issues guide on education, Public Agenda Online, New York, N.Y., at *publicagenda.org/issues/overview.cfm?issue_type=education*

[35] Public Agenda Online at *publicagenda.org/issues/angles_pcc_detail2.cfm?issue_type=education&graph1=pcc2new.gif*

[36] Public Agenda Online at *publicagenda.org/issues/pcc_detail2.cfm?issue_type=education&concern_graphic=pccn3.gif*

[37] Public Agenda Online at *publicagenda.org/issues/pcc_detail.cfm?issue_type=education&list=5*

[38] "Overview: The Issue at a Glance" issues guide on education, Public Agenda Online, New York, N.Y., at *publicagenda.org/issues/overview.cfm?issue_type=education*

[39] N.C.G.S. 159-48(c)(4) allows local governments to borrow money and issue bonds for "Providing school facilities, including without limitation schoolhouses, buildings, plants and other facilities, physical and vocational educational buildings and facilities, including in connection therewith classrooms, laboratories, libraries, auditoriums, administrative offices, gymnasiums, athletic fields, lunchrooms, utility plants, garages, and school buses and other necessary vehicles."