

What Polls Have Shown About Public Attitudes Toward School Choice

Public opinion has been decidedly mixed on the concept of school choice. Public attitudes have ranged from strong support (as high as 69 percent in favor of open enrollment) to overwhelming opposition (as high as 74 percent against private-school choice) in various opinion polls. But, as with any survey, the results often depend on how pollsters phrase their questions or what groups they survey.

In general, polls have shown that the public strongly supports open enrollment in *public schools*. For example, in a 1993 Gallup poll, 65 percent of those surveyed agreed that students and their parents should be able to attend the public school of their choice.¹ However, polls also have found that most parents would *not* send their child to another public school, if given the choice. For instance, a 1992 survey of parents with students in public schools found that most (70 percent) had no desire to send their child to another school.²

Public opinion toward vouchers and other types of private-school choice has been mixed. A number of polls have found strong public opposition to vouchers, particularly when the surveys clearly state that public money would be used to pay for students attending private or religious schools. Nevertheless, some polls have shown moderate support for vouchers, depending on the wording of the questions. Not surprisingly, voucher proposals are backed much more strongly by parents with children in private schools. For instance, a 1994 Gallup poll found that vouchers were supported by less than half (45 percent) of all the survey respondents, but by more than two-thirds (69 percent) of the parents of private-school students.³ Nevertheless, support for private-school choice options appears to be growing.

"Survey results may vary," the Carnegie Foundation reports in a study of school choice. "What is indisputable, however, is that in less than five years, the drive to include non-public schools in 'choice' plans has moved from the edge of the school reform debate toward the center stage."⁴ Here are some examples of polls that have surveyed public opinion regarding school choice and vouchers, listed from the most to the least recent:

1. Simmons, Boyle & Associates, for the N.C. Association of Educators and the N.C. PTA, January 1995. (Telephone survey of 400 North Carolina registered voters; margin of error +/- 4 percent.)⁵

"Do you believe that state funds should be used to support private schools (K-12)?"

Yes 16.3%
 No 78.5%
 Don't know 5.0%

"Using state funds to support private schools (K-12), would improve education in North Carolina:"

A great deal 9.0%
 Somewhat 10.8%
 Very little 18.3%
 Not at all 59.8%
 No answer 2.3%

2. The Gallup Organization, for Phi Delta Kappa, May 10-June 8, 1994 (Survey of 1,326 adults nationwide; overall margin of error, +/- 3 percent.)⁶

"A proposal has been made which would allow parents to send their school-age children to any public, private, or church-related school they choose. For those parents choosing nonpublic schools, the government would pay all or part of the tuition. Would you favor or oppose this proposal in your state?"

			Don't
	Favor	Oppose	Know
All respondents	45%	54%	1%
No children in school ..	42%	57%	1%
Public school parents ...	48%	51%	1%
Nonpublic school parents	69%	29%	2%

3. The Gallup Organization, for Phi Delta Kappa, May 21-June 9, 1993 (Survey of 1,306 adults nationwide; overall margin of error, +/- 3 percent.)⁷

"Do you favor or oppose allowing students and their parents to choose which public schools in this community the students attend, regardless of where they live?"

	Favor	Oppose	Don't Know
All respondents	65%	33%	2%
Public school parents ...	68%	31%	1%
Nonpublic school parents	61%	38%	1%

"Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?"

	Favor	Oppose	Don't Know
All respondents	24%	74%	2%
Public school parents ...	27%	72%	1%
Nonpublic school parents	45%	55%	—

4. The Wirthlin Group, for The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, September 1992 (Nationwide survey of 1,005 people; margin of error, +/- 3 percent.)⁸

"Please imagine two people having a discussion on how to improve the public schools in this country. Mr. Smith says: The best way to improve education is to focus directly on supporting neighborhood schools, giving every school the resources needed to achieve excellence. Mr. Jones says: The best way to improve education is to let schools compete with each other for students. Quality schools would be further strengthened and weak schools would improve or close.

Who are you more likely to agree with, Mr. Smith, who would support every neighborhood school, or Mr. Jones, who would let schools compete for students?"

Mr. Smith	82%
Mr. Jones	15%
No opinion	2%
Don't know/No response	1%

5. Louis Harris & Associates, for Business Week, Aug. 26-31, 1992 (Survey of 1,250 adults nationwide; margin of error, +/- 3 percent.)⁹

"... Now, I'd like to read you a series of statements about public school education in this country. Tell me whether you agree or disagree with each statement . . .

Children should be able to attend the public school of their choice, including one outside of their district, with government money going to the school they attend."

Agree	69%
Disagree	29%
Not Sure	2%

"Children should be able to attend any school they qualify for, including public, parochial, or private schools, with government money going to poor or middle income children attending private or parochial schools."

Agree	63%
Disagree	35%
Not Sure	2%

6. The Wirthlin Group, for The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, July-August 1992 (Nationwide survey of 1,013 parents with children attending public schools; margin of error, +/- 3 percent.)¹⁰

"Is there some other school to which you would like to send your child? This school could be public or private, inside or outside of your district, with your child's grade level."

Yes, public school	9%
Yes, private school	19%
No	70%
Don't know	2%

"Some people think that parents should be given a voucher which they could use to enroll their children in a private school at public expense. Do you support or oppose this idea?"

Support	32%
Oppose	62%
Don't know	6%

7. The Gallup Organization, for Phi Delta Kappa, May 3-17, 1991 (Survey of 1,500 adults nationwide; margin or error, +/- 3 percent.)¹¹

"In some nations, the government allots a certain amount of money for each child's education. The parents can then send the child to any public, parochial, or private school they choose. This is called the 'voucher system.' Would you like to see such an idea adopted in this country?"

Favor 50%
 Oppose 39%
 Don't know 11%

"Do you favor or oppose allowing students and their parents to choose which public schools in this community the students attend, regardless of where they live?"

Favor 62%
 Oppose 33%
 Don't know 5%

"If you could choose your children's schools among any of the public schools in this community, would you choose the ones they now attend or different ones?"

	Public School Parents
Would choose same as now	68%
Different ones	23%
Don't know	9%

—Tom Mather

FOOTNOTES

¹ Poll conducted by the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa, May 21–June 9, 1993, in a survey of 1,306 adults nationwide, as reported in "Report Card on The Nation's Schools," *The Polling Report*, Oct. 11, 1993, p. 2.

² Poll conducted by The Wirthlin Group for The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, July-August 1992, in a survey of 1,013 parents with children attending public schools, as reported by Ernest Boyer, ed., *School Choice*, The Carnegie Foundation, Princeton, N.J., 1992, pp. 10-11.

³ Poll conducted by the Gallup Organization for Phi Delta Kappa, May 10-June 8, 1994, in a survey of 1,326 adults nationwide, as reported in "Report Card on the Nation's Schools," *The Polling Report*, Aug. 29, 1994, p. 1.

⁴ Boyer, note 2 above, p. 63.

⁵ Simmons, Boyle & Assoc., "NC Statewide Opinion Survey," poll conducted for the N.C. Association of Educators

and the N.C. Congress of Parents and Teachers, January 1995, pp. 11 and 23.

⁶ "Report Card on the Nation's Schools," *The Polling Report*, Aug. 29, 1994, p. 1.

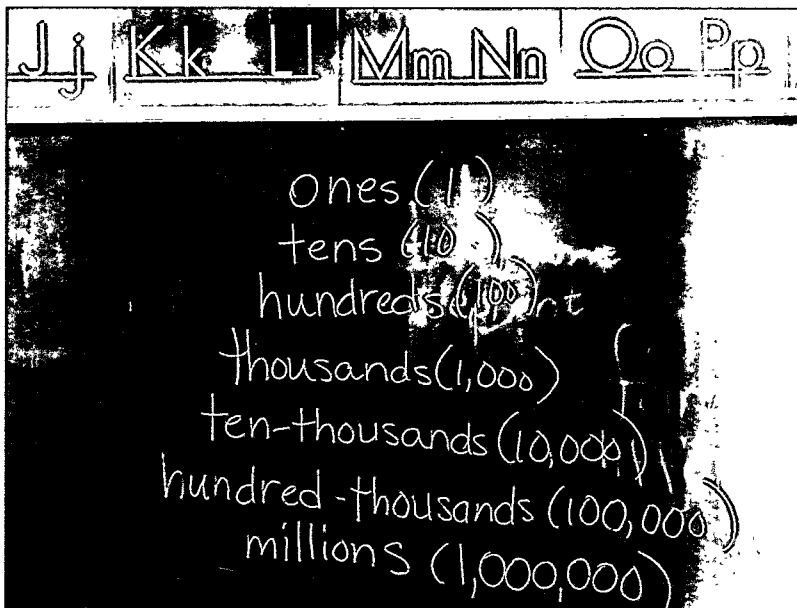
⁷ "Report Card on the Nation's Schools," *The Polling Report*, Oct. 11, 1993, p. 2.

⁸ Boyer, note 2 above, p. 13.

⁹ "Public School Quality, Private School Choice," *The Polling Report*, Oct. 26, 1992, pp. 6-7.

¹⁰ Boyer, note 2 above, pp. 11 and 19.

¹¹ "The Public Schools," *The Polling Report*, Sept. 2, 1991, p. 8.



Karen Tam