

## What Is the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Education?

By

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A significant number of changes have occurred in America which raises a question of how they have or will impact public education. Some examples of these changes are:

- An economic downturn
- The election of the first minority president
- The Democratic Party gaining control of the White House and both houses of Congress
- Failing banks and other financial institutions
- Collapse or bankruptcy of many businesses (large and small)
- The collapse of the automobile industry
- Unemployment like we have never seen
- Corruption and unethical conduct in government and the business world
- The stock market debacle
- Stimulus packages and "bailouts"
- An alarming ever increasing federal debt

For 41 years Phi Delta Kappa has conducted a poll with the Gallup Organization to obtain the public's attitude toward the public schools. The results of the poll have become a valuable resource to policy makers at all levels and it is highly respected by policy makers in our nation's capitol. The 41<sup>st</sup>. Poll released in September is especially significant as the slogan for President Obama's campaign was "change." The question has the public's attitudes toward public education changed is especially relevant. Phi Delta Kappa with their 41<sup>st</sup>. Annual Poll is one of the first benchmarks available to see whether there are changes. Each year the poll includes new questions about emerging issues as well as previously asked questions to identify shifts in public opinion.

### **TEACHERS**

In a speech to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce on March 10, 2009, President Obama said, "From the moment students enter a school, the most important factor in their success is not the color of the skin or the income of the parents, it's the person standing at the front of the classroom." Over the years PDK has explored opinions about public school teachers and questions that were asked in 1984 when compared to this year's poll revealed:

- Today, almost three out of four Americans favor merit pay for teachers.
- Academic Achievement or improvement of students as measured by standardized tests, administrator's evaluations, and an advanced degree such as a master's or doctorate are the three most favored criteria for awarding merit pay.
- When asked what personal qualities they would look for in a teacher resulted in some dramatic shifts compared to the same questions in 1983.

1. Dedication to the profession and enthusiasm was rated # 1 this year, while it was rated as # 6 in 1983.
  2. Caring about students was # 2 this year, but only # 9 in 1983
  3. Intelligence was # 3 this year but it was only # 8 in 1983.
  4. Ability to discipline was # 3 in 1983, and was #7 this year.
  5. Ability to communicate was # 1 in 1983, and # 4 in this year's poll
- Three out of four Americans believe we should have national standards for the certification of public school teachers.
  - Seven out of 10 Americans would like a child of theirs to take up teaching as a career, the highest favorable rating in more than three decades.

### **CHARTER SCHOOLS**

In a speech on June 22, 2009, to the National Alliance of Public Charter Schools, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan reiterated his and President Obama's support for public charter schools. During the last five years, American's approval of charter schools has increased by 15%, as almost two out of three Americans now say they favor the idea of charter schools.

However, Americans really don't understand charter schools. They were almost evenly split on whether they were public schools, and if they are free to teach religion. The majority continue to believe charter schools can charge tuition and that schools can select the students who attend.

### **NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND**

How do Americans feel about NCLB after its implementation over seven years ago?

- Support continues to decline as almost one out of two Americans view it unfavorably
- Only one out of four Americans say it has helped schools in their community
- By a two to one margin, Americans continue to support one element of NCLB, that being annual testing of students in grades three through eight.
- Not only do Americans support testing, they also support using a single national test, rather than letting each state use its own test.

### **DROPOUTS**

Dropouts have become a "hot topic" in many circles, and four new questions were included in this year's poll to ascertain if Americans agree that not completing high school is a serious problem, and what might be done to reduce the number of dropouts.

- Almost nine out of ten Americans believe the dropout rate in the U.S. is either the most important or one of the most important problems facing high schools today.
- Eight out of ten Americans said that students failing too many classes or leaving school to take a job or to be a parent are the main causes of dropping out.

- Offering more interesting classes was the suggestion offered most often when asked what could help reduce the dropout rate.

### **EARLY CHILDHOOD/PRESCHOOL**

The President and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan have gone on record supporting investments in early childhood education, and the economic stimulus legislation earmarked more than \$4 billion in additional funds to support these programs. Questions in the poll were directed to looking at the importance Americans assign to assisting children and their families before they enroll in 1<sup>st</sup>. grade.

- Americans strongly endorse making either half-day or full-day kindergarten compulsory for all children.
- On the other hand, Americans are not yet ready for children to start school at age four.
- Almost six out of ten Americans said they would be willing to pay more taxes to fund free preschool programs for those children whose parents are unable to pay for them.
- When asked where preschool programs should be located, and half of Americans believe preschool programs should be housed in public schools. Eighteen years ago the same question found Americans were evenly divided suggesting public schools, parent's workplace, or special preschool facilities.

### **ECONOMIC STIMULUS**

Congress passed and the President signed the American Recovery Reinvestment Act (ARRA), the single largest government investment in the economy. This \$575 billion spending plan included almost \$91 billion for education and related programs. When asked how the education stimulus funds should be utilized, Americans said the first priority should be to keep teachers who were slated to be laid off, followed by providing support to the lowest performing schools.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS**

So what can school administrators glean from the poll concerning attitudes of John Q. Public towards the public schools? Here are is a brief summary of what to look for.

- Watch for merit pay and issues surrounding it
- National standards for the certification of teachers
- Growth and support for charter schools
- Support for annual testing of students and support for a single national test
- Increased emphasis on reducing the dropout rate

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- Continued discussion on early childhood/preschool education with emphasis on schools being the preferred location for their existence.
- Disagreement how “stimulus funds” for education should be used

If you are interested in the results of the entire 41<sup>st</sup>. Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Annual Poll on the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, go online to: [www.pdkintl.org](http://www.pdkintl.org) or Phi Delta Kappa International, 408 No. Union Streets, Bloomington, IN 47404