Values, Vision And Performance

Americans’ Hopes for their Public Schools

February 2008
Values, Vision And Performance
is a project of the Learning First Alliance

www.learningfirst.org
www.publicschoolinsights.org
Purpose of this Study

• Understand voters’ views on public schools

• Consider how public schools can better serve public interest

• Consider actions public schools can take to foster public support

Learning First Alliance, January 2006
The Study’s Methods

• Two-year research initiative conducted in partnership with The Mellman Group

• 2004:
  - Focus groups and national poll of 1,300 voters

• 2005:
  - Focus groups and national poll of 1,000 voters

• Cross-checked data with other opinion polls, reports and studies
6 Categories of Major Findings

I. School Quality
II. Values and Public Schools
III. The Mission Of Public Schools
IV. The Vision Of Quality Public Schools
V. School Funding
VI. Accountability And Progress Reports
I. School Quality

Voters’ perceptions of public school quality
School Quality

• Voters are most confident in the schools with which they have personal experience

• Lack of parent involvement and discipline drive perceptions of poor school quality

• African American and Latino voters cite lack of teacher attention as the most important problem
Voters are Confident in the Public Schools they Know
Less Confident about Other Public Schools

How would you rate the quality of education in public schools in _________?

Your Neighborhood

- Parents with kids in public school
  - 70% positive
  - 24% negative

- All Voters
  - 57% positive
  - 39% negative

The United States generally

- All Voters
  - 45% positive
  - 50% negative
Parent Involvement, Discipline, and Unequal Access Drive Perceptions of Poor School Quality

Less Concern about Lack of Accountability and Teacher Quality

(\% most important problems facing public schools)

- Parents are not involved enough: 79\%
  - 30\% most imp\t
- Parents too busy to help kids in school: 71\%
  - 23\% most imp\t
- Discipline in classroom broken down: 69\%
  - 26\% most imp\t
- Not holding school accountable to high standards of performance: 59\%
- Too many teachers are not qualified: 46\%
  - 12\%
“I think there’s a lot of parents who are not that involved. A lot of parents use school as a daycare basically.”

-Latino Male Parent, Portland
For African Americans and Latinos: Lack of Teacher Attention is Most Important Problem

African American and Latino voters saw this as the biggest problem whereas white voters placed it near the bottom of their list of concerns.

Students not getting individual attention from the teachers (% one of the most important)

- **Total**: 18%
- **Latino**: 42%
- **African American**: 38%
- **White**: 13%

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“A lot of time, depending on what area you are in, I think your kids get a substandard education.”

-African American Female Parent, Birmingham
II. Values

Voters’ perception of values that public schools should promote
Values

• Voters say faith, security, personal responsibility, patriotism and personal values are most important.

• Voters emphasize individual responsibility and effort.

• Voters want public schools to demonstrate that they share voters’ core values.

• Voters want students to work hard, but they also want a level playing field.
Voters Rank Faith, Security, Personal Responsibility, Patriotism and Personal Values as Most Important in their daily lives

(\% at least very important values)

- **Faith in God**: 49% most imp, 84% very important
- **Personal responsibility**: 45% most imp, 95% very important
- **Secure from crime & terrorism**: 45% most imp, 91% very important
- **Loving your country**: 42% most imp, 88% very important
- **Living up to your values**: 41% most imp, 94% very important
- **Hard work and persistence**: 36% most imp, 93% very important

(darker shading = stronger intensity)
“I am responsible for myself and my happiness and what I do.”

-White Male Parent, Phoenix

“That is the key to it, to get (our) kids to understand that you have to be responsible for your own action.”

- African-American Male Parent, Birmingham
Voters Want Public Schools to Demonstrate that they Share Voters’ Core Values

(\% most important goals for public schools)

- Teaching hard work & responsibility: 44\% most imp, 93\% very important
- Providing opportunity for all students to succeed: 36\% most imp, 93\% very important
- Cultivating respectful and responsible behavior: 42\% most imp, 92\% very important
- Providing Equal access to quality education for all: 40\% most imp, 91\% very important
- Encourage students to have respect for individuality: 39\% most imp, 90\% very important

(darker shading=stronger intensity)
“[A good school] starts with good, solid, basic values.”

-Latina Female Parent, Portland
III. Mission

Voters’ perceptions of the purpose—or mission—of public schools.
Mission

Voters see a mission for public schools that builds on shared values.

Voters want public schools to offer concrete skills and economic benefits.

Voters are somewhat less supportive of abstract goals.

Voters also see public schools as an antidote to poverty and crime.
Voters Want Public Schools to Provide Needed Skills and Contribute to Economic Benefits

(\% \textit{important goals for local public schools})

- Giving students the skills and knowledge they need for success: 38\% one of the most important, 90\%
- Contributing to the economic success of the country: 36\% one of the most important, 89\%
- Preparing students to be lifelong learners: 38\% one of the most important, 88\%

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Voters Somewhat Less Supportive of Abstract Goals

(% important goals for local public schools)

- Preparing students to be citizens who can participate in communities
  - 31% one of the most
  - 84% very important

- Helping students learn about values that bind Americans in common purpose
  - 25% one of the most
  - 78% very important

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Voters Want Public Schools to Offer Clear Benefits to their Kids, Communities and Country

If kids get a good education they are more likely to become productive members of society:
- 39% most imp
- 88%

Healthy communities need to have strong public schools:
- 34% most imp
- 87%

Strong nat’l economy requires good public schools:
- 32% most imp
- 81%

*(darker shading = stronger intensity)*
Voters also Say Public Schools are Key to Opportunity and an Antidote to Poverty and Crime

Public schools are engine of opportunity for all Americans

Most Americans who have worked their way out of poverty have been educated in public schools

Without free pub schools, problems like crime and welfare dependency would get worse

(% important reasons to keep schools well funded)

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“To me, the public school is the backbone of the future of the country... The tone of the public schools to me will be the tone of society in future years.”

-White Male Parent, Phoenix
IV. Vision

Voters’ vision of a good public school
Vision

• Voters have a vision of a good public school

• Voters’ vision includes both inputs and results.

• Voters want students to learn a wide array of knowledge skills and habits, leading to success in the “real world.”

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Voters Have a Vision of a Good Public School

Analysis weighs the relative importance of each attribute in a good public school

- Students happy & eager to learn: 25%
- Discipline: 20%
- Test scores: 20%
- Parent involvement: 22%
- Class size: 13%

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“You have happy students, you have happy teachers, and you don’t see anyone just wandering around. Everyone has a purpose when they are there.”

-White Female Parent, Baltimore
Voters’ Vision of a Good School Includes Inputs and Results

- **Dedicated and trained teachers**: 93% important
- **Parents send kids who are respectful of teachers, principals and staff**: 90% important
- **Textbooks and other materials are up to date**: 86% important
- **Discipline in the classrooms**: 86% important
- **Students know the difference between right and wrong**: 81% important
- **Students are prepared for the real world**: 87% important

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Voters Want Substantial Learning, Leading to Success in the “Real World”

- Learning the basics is non-negotiable

- Discipline and respect for others are almost as important.

- But voters recognize the real demands of life and work in the 21st century—voters stress the importance of many different skills
Voters Want Students to Learn Wide Array of Knowledge Skills and Habits, Leading to Success in the “Real World”

(rank by % important)

- Basics, like reading & arithmetic: 97%
- Discipline & respect for others: 94%
- How to learn on own in the future: 93%
- Desire to cont. learning throughout life: 92%
- Good work habits: 92%
- How to solve problems: 92%
- Prepared for next step in life: 90%
- Motivate themselves to work hard: 90%
- How each stud. can achieve full potential: 87%
- Interact w/ diff. cultures & diff. countries: 85%
- How to work with diff kinds of people: 84%
- How to think critically: 83%
- How to choose path in life right for them: 82%
- What want to do w/ life & how to achieve goals: 82%

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V. Funding

Voters’ opinions on school funding
Funding

- Voters support equitable and adequate funding but worry money will be wasted.

- Voters cite fiscal transparency and accountability as effective ways to gain their support for increased funding.
Voters Support Equitable, Adequate Funding but Worry Whether Funds will be Well Spent

If additional money is spent on education, do you think it is more likely to result in better education in your state, or is the additional money more likely to be wasted?

Parents differ from non-parents on school spending

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“I’m not going to vote for [money] to fix their problems when they don’t know how to spend their money right.”

-Latino Male Parent, Portland
Voters Cite Financial Transparency and Accountability Among Most Effective Ways of Ensuring their Support for More Funding

- 56% Very Likely
- 85% taxpayers had detailed info on how $ was spent
- 54% Very Likely
- 83% % likely to support increased funding for public schools

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VI. Accountability And Progress Reports

Voters’ views on information about school performance
Accountability and Progress Reports

• Information is key to building voter confidence in public schools

• Information is key to building support for increased funding

• Voters want information on a variety of areas, not just test scores

• Voters do not see test scores as an end, but as a means to help children succeed

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Voters Say More Information Would Increase their Confidence in Public Schools

*If you were to receive regular progress reports about the local public schools, do you think it would increase your confidence in the schools and their ability to do quality work?*

72% yes  
20% no
Information is Key to Building Support for Increased Funding

If additional money is spent on education, do you think it is more likely to result in better education in your state, or is the additional money more likely to be wasted?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voters who report receiving enough information</th>
<th>Voters who report not receiving enough information</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>48%</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>39%</td>
<td>32%</td>
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<td>+9</td>
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<td>54%</td>
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</tbody>
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‘You have to measure it, otherwise you are not going to truly know.’

-White Male Parent, Portland

‘It’s not all about test scores.’

-White Male, Baltimore
Voters Want Information on a Variety of Areas, Not Just Test Scores

- Sufficient staff and resources: 35% one of the most important, 89%
- Written reports of student test scores with explanations of how to help students: 34% one of the most important, 86%
- Schools demonstrate effective use of funds: 27% one of the most important, 83%
- Good record on safety and discipline: 26%, 84%
- Clear expectations for parent involvement: 24%, 77%
- Improvements in standardized test scores: 15%, 67%

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Voters Do Not See Test Scores as an End, but as a Means to Help Students Succeed

- Reports of student test scores with explanation and how to help/support student: 86%
- Rising standardized test scores: 67%

**Most effective ways to increase confidence in local public schools**

- 34% one of the most important
- 15% one of the most important

Graph showing the percentage of importance.
Summing Up

• Voters want schools to support core values

• Voters want schools to provide concrete benefits to individuals and the country

• Voters’ vision of good schools includes both inputs—such as good teachers, involved parents, and new textbooks—and results—such as test scores and students prepared for the real world.

• Transparency inspires public confidence and support for more funding
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For more information on public opinion on school success, see: 

www.publicschoolinsights.org