



ARIZONA SCHOOL BOARDS ASSOCIATION

Summary: PDK Poll 2009

The Phi Delta Kappan poll of public attitudes about public education, administered by the Gallup polling organization, shows some dramatic changes in public attitudes for 2009.

Teaching as a profession

For example, in 1980 only 48 percent of parents would want their child to become a public school teacher, compared to 70 percent in 2009. This 22 point increase came from a 10 point decline in “don’t know” and 12 point decline in those who previously chose “no.” However, this was still lower than the 75 percent who chose “yes” in 1965. Interestingly, 57 percent of respondents thought that beginning teachers earned under \$35,000 a year, but 78 percent thought beginning teachers salaries should be more than \$35,000 a year, and 40 percent thought they should be over \$45,000 a year. Actual beginning teacher salaries nationwide average around \$35,000.

Teacher requirements

When asked if teacher certification requirements should be reduced to recruit more science, math, technical and vocational teachers, 71 percent were opposed, but there was an 11 point increase in those who favored the idea in 2009 over respondents in 1986.

No Child Left Behind

The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act is becoming better known and less popular. When asked if they had a favorable (“very favorable” plus “somewhat favorable) or unfavorable opinion of the NCLB act, 24 percent chose “don’t know enough about it to say” in 2009 compared with 35 percent in 2008 (33 percent “don’t know enough to say” plus 2 percent “don’t know” in 2008). That 11 point change was part of a 15 point increase in respondents who had an unfavorable view of NCLB. The respondents who had an unfavorable opinion of NCLB increased to 48 percent in 2009 from 33 percent in 2008, but when you discount those who chose “don’t know” almost two-thirds of the knowledgeable public (63 percent) had an unfavorable view of NCLB. Respondents with a favorable opinion declined from 32 percent in 2008 to 28 percent in 2009.

When asked about the impact of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) act on local schools, the change from last year was negative. Only 4 percent of respondents were unsure (“don’t know”) this year compared to 19 percent last year, and the 15 percent change was made up of a 9 percent increase in those who said NCLB was “making no difference” and 6 percent increase in those who said it was “hurting” public schools. Thus, overall, 43 percent of the respondents said NCLB was “making no difference” and 29 percent said it was hurting public schools, while only 24 percent said it was “helping.” That 29 percent who chose “hurting” was up 7 points over last year, 6 percent from the previous “don’t know” and 1 percent from last year’s “helping” choice.

Interestingly, 66 percent of respondents still supported annual testing of children, about the same as the 67 percent in 2002, but those choosing “oppose” did increase by absorbing 1 percent of the “favor” and 2 percent from “don’t know.” Similarly, 66 percent preferred the use of a national test over having each state using its own, but this was down from 2002 with letting each state use its own test increasing from 30 percent in 2002 to 33 percent in 2009.

Parent approval of public schools

The parents approval rating of public schools was fairly stable, with parents giving the school their oldest child attends an A or B only one percentage point more each than last year, but these two percentage points came from parents who chose “fail” in 2008. More parents also felt public schools were better today (50 percent) than when the parents were in school, while 43 percent chose “worse,” but respondents who did not have children in school felt public schools today were “worse” rather than “better” by 53 percent to 36 percent.

Only 48 percent of respondents felt that public schools were “moving on the right track” to “providing quality education,” and when asked what factors would help to move schools on the right track, “More parent support” was cited the most at 85 percent followed by “Better teachers” at 82 percent and “More funding” came in fourth at 62 percent, right behind “Better use of technology” at 63 percent.

When asked what was the biggest obstacle to moving on the right track to a quality education, “Lack of money” dominated at 71 percent versus 29 percent saying it was not an obstacle. The other three choices were nearly evenly split between obstacle and not an obstacle, with “Lack of community support” the highest at 58 percent versus 41 percent.

Charter schools

There was an interesting dichotomy over charter schools. Since 2006 the percent of respondents who oppose charter schools has been between 33 and 35 percent, with 2009 at 33 percent. However, the approval choice has yo-yoed from 53 percent in 2006, to 60 percent in 2007, to 51 percent in 2008, to 64 percent in 2009. This variation coming almost entirely from respondents who chose “don’t know” and reflecting confusion that was evident in follow-up questions showing the respondents mostly did not understand what charter schools were.

Teacher tenure and ‘merit pay’

Confusion was also evident in questions about teacher tenure. If “tenure” was defined as a “lifetime contract” then almost three-fourths disapproved, but if “tenure” was defined as “a formal legal review” before termination then two-thirds approved. The latter definition is the reality in most cases.

Teacher ‘merit pay’

The public also approved “merit pay” by a larger percentage (72 percent) in 2009 than in 1984 (65 percent), the last time the question was asked, but the gain came almost entirely from a reduction in those who chose “don’t know” since those who chose “oppose” declined only one percentage point. However, again there may have been some confusion in terms. When asked what criteria “should” be used to pay merit increases, the largest criterion chosen was advanced degrees, such as Masters or Ph.D. at 81 percent. Test scores at 73 percent and administrators’ evaluations at 72 percent were next, but length of teaching experience was next at 67 percent. Teaching experience and advanced degrees are the dominant criteria in existing teacher compensation programs.

Compulsory kindergarten

Respondents showed overwhelming support for compulsory kindergarten at 81 percent “favor,” a substantial increase over the 71 percent approval level of 1986. But making age 4 the starting age for school was “not a good idea” at 61 percent, with about 40 percent saying it would improve their academics and 41 saying it would make no difference and 18 percent saying it would make it worse. The respondents did support locating parent-paid preschool programs at public schools at 50 percent versus 40 percent who favored separate childcare facilities, and 58 percent supported a tax to provide subsidies for children whose parents could not afford preschool.

Online high school courses

Online high school courses saw an increase in public approval from 30 percent in 2001 to 47 percent in 2009, but this was a 53 percent approval in the West versus a 37 percent approval in the East, while the South and Midwest were at 48 percent.

View the full Phi Delta Kappan poll of public attitudes about public education at:
www.pdkintl.org/kappan/poll.htm