

# Public Opinion Data: Americans Want School Choice

Updated December 2004

In independent public opinion surveys conducted during the last several years, Americans have expressed consistent support for school choice. Support is notable even in polls whose design might be questionable or expected to elicit negative views.

## The Majority of Americans Want Choice

1. In a 2004 poll by the First Amendment Center, 62 percent agreed that “parents should have the option of sending their children to non-public schools, including those with a religious affiliation, using vouchers or credits provided by the federal government that would pay for some or all of the costs.”<sup>1</sup>
2. Also in 2004, the Friedman Foundation asked the respected research firm Wirthlin Worldwide to study the public’s response to differently worded questions about school choice. Respondents asked the neutrally worded question, “Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose any school, public or private, to attend using public funds?” registered 63 percent support for school choice, very similar to the findings of the First Amendment Center.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, among respondents asked the negatively worded question asked annually on the Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, “Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?” only about 41 percent expressed support for choice.<sup>3</sup>

The 2004 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll asked not just whether respondents favored vouchers, but whether they would use them. If offered a full-tuition voucher, 56 percent of Americans would select a private school. Even with a half-tuition voucher, 48 percent would still choose a private school.<sup>4</sup>

3. An Interactive Poll by Zogby International in July 2002 showed majority support for targeted vouchers.

<b>Zogby International<sup>5</sup></b>	
<i>“Do you agree or disagree that the federal government should set aside public funds for students enrolled in public schools that are considered to be failing? The money will then be used to pay for the students to attend their choice of public, private, or parochial school.”</i>	
<b>Agree</b>	53 %
<b>Disagree</b>	42 %
<b>Not Sure</b>	5%

<sup>1</sup> “State of the First Amendment 2004,” June 28, 2004, <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/PDF/SOFA2004results.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0409pol.htm> and <http://www.friedmanfoundation.org/news/2004-08-20.html>.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0409pol.htm> and <http://www.friedmanfoundation.org/news/2004-08-20.html>.

<sup>4</sup> The 36<sup>th</sup> Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” August 24, 2004. Available at: <http://www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0409pol.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Conducted on July 10 – 14, 2002. Available at: <http://www.zogby.com/search/ReadNews.dbm?ID=606>.

4. In 2002, the Associated Press and International Communications Research polled over 1,000 adults, asking them if they favored the idea of school vouchers to help send children to private or parochial schools. Respondents supported vouchers by a margin of 51 – 40.<sup>6</sup>
5. Nationwide support for school choice is evident, in poll after poll since 2000.

<b>Washington Post / Kaiser / Harvard 2000 Election Values Survey<sup>7</sup></b>	
<i>“Do you favor or oppose providing parents with tax money in the form of school vouchers to help pay for their children to attend private or religious schools?”</i>	
<b>For</b>	49 %
<b>Against</b>	47 %

<b>Pew Research Center / Princeton Survey Research Associates<sup>8</sup></b>	
<i>“I’d like your opinion on some programs and proposals being discussed in this country today. Please tell me if you strongly favor, favor, oppose, or strongly oppose each one...Federal funding for vouchers to help low-and-middle-income parents send their children to private and parochial school?”</i>	
<b>For</b>	53 %
<b>Against</b>	44 %

<b>NBC News / Wall Street Journal Poll<sup>9</sup></b>	
<i>“Let me read you two positions on school vouchers. Between these positions, which do you tend to side with more? Position A: Government should give parents more educational choices by providing taxpayer-funded vouchers to help pay for private or religious schools. Position B: Government funding should be limited to public schools.”</i>	
<b>For</b>	56 %
<b>Against</b>	38 %

<b>University of Maryland<sup>10</sup></b>	
<i>“Do you favor or oppose establishing a school voucher program that would allow parents to use tax funds to send their children to a private school?”</i>	
<b>For</b>	50 %
<b>Against</b>	45 %

<sup>6</sup> Poll conducted for the AP by ICR on July 17 – 21, 2002. Results available at: <http://www.bayarea.com/mld/mercurynews/3817094.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Conducted on September 7, 2000.

<sup>8</sup> Conducted on August 24, 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Conducted on August 10, 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Conducted on June 23, 2000.

<b>University of Connecticut<sup>11</sup></b>	
<i>“Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements. Parents should have the option of sending their children to religious schools instead of public schools using ‘vouchers’ or ‘credits’ provided by the government that would pay for some or all costs.”</i>	
<b>For</b>	64 %
<b>Against</b>	34 %

6. According to a CBS/New York Times poll, the public wants choice even if schools receive less money.

<b>CBS News / New York Times<sup>12</sup></b>	
<i>“What if that meant the public schools in your community would receive less money, then would you agree or disagree that parents should get tax-funded vouchers they can use to help pay for tuition for their children to attend private or religious schools instead of public schools?”</i>	
<b>Agree</b>	69 %
<b>Disagree</b>	26 %
<b>Don't know / No answer</b>	5 %

7. According to CNN, *USA Today* and Gallup, the public believes school choice will make public schools better.

<b>CNN / USA Today / Gallup<sup>13</sup></b>	
<i>“Would vouchers improve the public school system?”</i>	
<b>Yes</b>	54 %
<b>No</b>	38 %

## Hispanic Americans Want School Choice

Hispanic Americans are now the largest minority constituency in the United States, and their support for school choice is as high as the general public.

1. An August 2003 poll of 1,000 Hispanic adults, conducted for the Latino Coalition, found 57 percent support for “allowing low-income parents to use taxpayer-funded vouchers to place their kids in private or church-run schools.”

<b>The Latino Coalition<sup>14</sup></b>	
<i>“Do you support or oppose allowing low-income parents to use taxpayer-funded vouchers to place their kids in private or church-run schools?”</i>	
<b>Support</b>	57 %
<b>Oppose</b>	35 %
<b>Don't Know / Refused</b>	8%

<sup>11</sup> Conducted on April 26, 2000.

<sup>12</sup> Conducted March 8 – 12, 2001. Telephone interviews with a national adult sample of 1,105.

<sup>13</sup> Conducted January 5-7, 2001. Available at: <http://www.cnn.com/2001/ALLPOLITICS/stories/01/10/cnn.poll/index.html>

<sup>14</sup> “2003 National Hispanic Survey,” August 20, 2003, <http://www.thelatinocoalition.com>.

2. A poll by CBS News and *The New York Times* conducted in 2003 found similar support.

<b>CBS News / New York Times<sup>15</sup></b>	
<i>“Parents should get tax-funded vouchers they can use to help pay for tuition for their children to attend private or religious schools instead of public schools?”</i>	
<b>Agree</b>	52 %
<b>Disagree</b>	39 %
<b>DK / NA</b>	9%

3. CBS News followed this poll with one of its own that focused on Hispanics in New York. The results showed that “Six in ten New York Hispanics support tax-funded vouchers, as do 55 percent of New York non-Hispanics”<sup>16</sup>

### **African-Americans Want School Choice**

1. The Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies conducts research on issues of special concern to black Americans and other minority groups. In its 2002 survey, a “majority (57 percent) of African Americans ... supported school vouchers. Support for school vouchers among Blacks is unchanged from the 2000 survey.”<sup>17</sup>
2. The Joint Center’s 2000 survey, which provided a more detailed breakdown of responses, also found, “Among blacks, those under 35 (75 percent) ... and those from households with children (74 percent) are most supportive.”<sup>18</sup>
3. The Joint Center’s findings accord with other recent national polls, including one from August 2002 by the Center for Education reform, which found 72 percent of African-Americans nationwide support scholarships targeted to poor parents.<sup>19</sup>
4. In Washington D.C., parents—especially minority and low-income parents—have shown strong support for school choice, as the **most recent independent poll** found.

<b>Washington Post<sup>20</sup></b>		
	<b>FOR</b>	<b>AGAINST</b>
<i>“Do you favor or oppose using federal money in the form of vouchers to help send low-income students in the District to private or parochial schools?”</i>	56%	36%
<i>Among African-American residents</i>	60%	32%
<i>Among low-income African Americans (income &lt; \$50,000)</i>	65%	28%

<sup>15</sup> “Hispanics in America,” July 13 – 27, 2003. Available at: [http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/CBSNews\\_polls/hispanic\\_back.pdf](http://www.cbsnews.com/htdocs/CBSNews_polls/hispanic_back.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Published on August 7, 2003. Available at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/08/07/opinion/polls/main567193.shtml>.

<sup>17</sup> “2002 National Opinion Poll,” <http://www.joincenter.org>. The Joint Center’s poll is particularly reliable because it asks the same neutral question year after year: “Would you support a voucher system where parents would get money from the government to send their children to the public, private, or parochial school of their choice?”

<sup>18</sup> “2002 National Opinion Poll,” <http://www.joincenter.org>.

<sup>19</sup> Center for Education Reform,” <http://www.edreform.com/press/2002/choicepoll.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> May 11 – 17, 1998.

## The Question of Tone

Public opinion surveys often report different answers to seemingly similar questions—reflecting word choice, the tone of the questioner, the overall context of the survey, and the sequence of questions. As the Gallup Poll News Service says, “Americans’ responses to school voucher programs vary significantly depending on the way in which the programs are described within survey wording.”<sup>21</sup>

One of the well-known ways to generate a negative response to vouchers is to tell respondents that vouchers drain money from public schools. Such questions hide true public opinion by associating school choice with something many find negative—decreasing public school funding—and by lumping two different policies into one question. As *The Washington Post* noted of such an advocacy poll of D.C. voters by the anti-voucher National School Boards Association, “That’s a loaded question if ever there was one.”<sup>22</sup>

In July 2002 an ABCNews.com poll asked both questions and found a drastic swing in opinion:

ABCNews.com/TNS Intersearch <sup>25</sup>		
	FOR	AGAINST
<i>Question One: “Support [for] helping low-income parents pay private or religious school tuition”</i>	50%	47%
<i>Among low-income households (income less than \$25,000)</i>	59%	39%
<i>Question Two: “If a voucher program reduced money to the public schools”</i>	28%	68%
<i>Among low-income households (income less than \$50,000)</i>	35%	62%

The annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll asks, “Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?”<sup>26</sup> In a 2002 *Washington Post* interview, Stanford University professor Terry Moe notes that Gallup tested its own version of the question, which removes the phrase “at public expense” and points out that vouchers could be used to pay for tuition “at the public, private or religious school of their choice.” Phrased that way, support for school choice doubled the PDK/Gallup poll reaching 62 percent.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr010115.asp>.

<sup>22</sup> “Straight Talk on Vouchers,” *Washington Post*, May 12, 2003.

<sup>25</sup> July 10 – 14, 2002. Available at: [http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/vouchers\\_poll020716.html](http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/vouchers_poll020716.html).

<sup>26</sup> The 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools,” August 20, 2003. Available at: <http://www.pdkintl.org/adv/03pollpr.htm>.

<sup>27</sup> “Vouchers: Was a Poll Question Cooked?” *Washington Post*, March 11, 2002. Available at:

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&node=&contentId=A11093-2002Mar11&notFound=true>