



COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

*Conducted for the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute
by the VCU Center for Public Policy*

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Virginians Show Strong Support for School Funding Needs

Richmond, VA—Virginians see a clear need for more money to support the schools, and most would be willing to pay higher taxes to get it, according to a new poll conducted by Virginia Commonwealth University. The Commonwealth Education Poll of 814 adults was conducted April 17-24 and has a margin of error of +/- 4 percent.

The poll found seven in ten Virginians believe funding for the schools is not enough. Just two in ten think that current funding is enough. The belief that school funding is not enough is widely shared regardless of political party, race, education, income, or region of residence within the state.

	Enough	Not Enough	Don't know/ No answer	Number of cases
Overall Funding for Schools	21%	70%	10%	814

Support for school funding appears strong even when costs to taxpayers are made explicit. Fifty-seven percent say they would be willing to pay higher taxes so that school funding could be increased. Sixty-five percent of Democrats are more willing to pay higher taxes for the schools; 54 percent of rank and file Republicans are willing to do so as are 56 percent of Independents. Two thirds of those who said funding for the schools was not enough were willing to pay higher taxes for a funding increase as were one third of those who said funds were already enough.

	Willing to Pay More Taxes for School Funds?			Number of cases
	Willing	Not Willing	Don't know/ No answer	
All respondents	57%	36%	7%	814
Democrats	65%	29%	6%	225
Republicans	54%	41%	5%	236
Independents	56%	36%	7%	257
Funding is Enough	33%	63%	4%	158
Funding is Not Enough	66%	28%	6%	581

Among those willing to pay higher taxes for the schools, a plurality (47 percent) reported that a sales tax increase would be best. 16 percent mentioned each of either income tax or real estate property tax, 13 percent said personal property tax.

When asked about the adequacy of funding in specific areas, Virginians saw the greatest need when it comes to teacher salaries. Two thirds of Virginians said funding for teacher salaries was not enough. About half (51 percent) said funding was not enough for school building construction and maintenance costs. The public was split 43-42 over whether funding for “operating costs to keep the schools running” were enough.

Opinion on School Vouchers

School vouchers have been a controversial issue in the national debate on education. But public opinion on vouchers is likely to be fuzzy because it is not yet clear how voucher proposals would be implemented. Recent national poll results on this issue have varied widely, depending on how questions about vouchers were worded. The Commonwealth Education Poll asked, “Do you favor or oppose giving parents education tax credits, or vouchers, to pay for their child’s tuition at a private, or parochial school of their choice?” Half of Virginians favored this idea; four in ten opposed it, with the remainder unsure of their opinion.

Younger adults are considerably more open to the idea of vouchers than older Virginians. Seventy percent of those age 29 and under favored vouchers compared to 39 percent of those 45-64 and 32 percent of those over age 65. “Younger adults have often shown more interest in issues affecting education,” said Cary Funk, director of the Commonwealth Poll. “In this case, it looks

like younger adults are also less wedded to the traditional funding arrangements which support public education.”

Republican leaders are increasingly identified with support for voucher proposals while Democratic leaders are more likely to oppose vouchers. The public tends to do the same. Six in ten Republicans favored the idea of vouchers while only about four in ten (41 percent) Democrats did.

“There is widespread agreement between Democrats and Republicans on a wide range of issues affecting the schools,” Funk said. “The voucher issue is one of the few that is highly politicized. Right now, people aren’t sure what vouchers would do, where the money would come from, and who would have access to them. Until vouchers come to have a common meaning, public opinion on this issue will be extremely fluid.”

One traditionally Democratic-leaning group is not following Democratic leaders on this issue, however. African-Americans tend to favor vouchers. Fifty-seven percent of African-Americans favor vouchers while 32 percent oppose them. This twenty-five point margin in favor of vouchers among African-Americans contrasts starkly with the net 7-point margin (49 to 42 percent) among whites.

William C. Boshier, Jr., Executive Director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute said, “While tax reduction continues as a major political issue, Virginians clearly indicate that they are willing to spend more on public education. This seems to be especially true in an environment of educational accountability.”

Questions Asked on the VCU Commonwealth Education Poll
April 17-24, 2001
Number of Respondents: 814

1. Overall, do you think the funding for public schools in Virginia is enough to meet their needs, or not enough to meet their needs?

Enough	21%
Not enough	70
Don't Know/No Answer	10

2. Would you be willing or not willing to pay higher taxes so that school funding could be increased?

Willing	57%
Not willing	36
Don't Know/No Answer	7

3. IF WILLING: What kind of tax increase do you think would be best-- sales tax, income tax, real estate property tax, or personal property tax?

	Of Those Willing
Sales tax	47%
Income tax	16
Real estate property tax	16
Personal property tax	13
Don't Know/No Answer	9

Is public school funding in Virginia enough or not enough to meet the following needs?

(Q. 4-6 asked in randomized order)

4. Building construction and maintenance?

Enough	32%
Not enough	51
Don't Know/No Answer	17

5. Operating costs to keep the schools running?

Enough	43%
Not enough	42
Don't Know/No Answer	15

6. Teacher salaries?

Enough	22%
Not enough	67
Don't Know/No Answer	11

7. Do you favor or oppose giving parents education tax credits, or vouchers, to pay for their child's tuition at a private, or parochial school of their choice?

Favor	50%
Oppose	40
Don't Know/No Answer	10

METHODOLOGY OF THE COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

The Commonwealth Education Poll is a public opinion survey of Virginia residents on education issues. The survey is conducted by telephone with a randomly-selected sample of adult Virginians.

Interviewing for The Commonwealth Education Poll was conducted by telephone from the facilities of the Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. The interviewing is conducted by a staff of professionally trained, paid interviewers using computer-assisted telephone interviewing software.

The sample of telephone numbers was prepared by Genesys Sampling Systems of Ft. Washington, Pennsylvania, and was designed so that all residential telephones, including new and unlisted numbers, had a known chance of inclusion. The cooperation rate for the survey was 53%. Using the CASRO response rate calculations, interviews were obtained with respondents in 45% of the known or assumed residential households in the sample.

The data were weighted to adjust for unequal probabilities of selection due to multiple telephone lines and multiple adults living in the household. In addition, the data were weighted on sex, race, age, and region of residence to reflect the demographic composition of the Virginia adult population. Percentages reported in the text and tables are weighted, while the number of cases shown in the tables for various subgroups is the actual number of respondents.

Questions answered by the full sample of adults are subject to a sampling error of plus or minus approximately 4 percentage points at the 95 percent level of confidence. This means that in 95 out of 100 samples like the one used here, the results obtained should be no more than 4 percentage points above or below the figure that would be obtained by interviewing all adult Virginians with telephones. Where the answers of subgroups are reported, the sampling error would be higher. Because of nonresponse (refusals to participate, etc.), standard calculations of sampling error are apt to understate the actual extent to which survey results are at variance with the

true population values. Surveys are also subject to errors from sources other than sampling. While every effort is made to identify such errors, they are often difficult or impossible to measure. Readers making use of the results are urged to be mindful of the limitations inherent in survey research.

More information on the methodology is available from the Director of the Commonwealth Poll, Dr. Cary Funk, at 804 827 1430 or clfunk@vcu.edu. Other results from the Commonwealth Education Poll can be found at <http://www.edpolicyvcu.org/>.

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