



COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

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

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE May 23, 2001

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Parent Involvement Found Lacking, Support for Character Education Widespread

Richmond, VA— While the public schools face many kinds of problems, lack of parent involvement is perceived to be chief among them. A new poll conducted by Virginia Commonwealth University asked whether a series of possible problems affected schools in the local community. The single most cited problem is a lack of parental involvement; this is more common to the public eye than a host of other concerns including poor quality teachers and student drug use. Second up is overcrowded classrooms. The Commonwealth Education Poll was conducted April 17-24 with 814 adults in Virginia. The margin of error is +/- 4 percent.

56 percent of Virginians feel that lack of parent involvement is a major problem for local schools and nearly three in ten (27 percent) feel this is a minor problem. Parents, themselves, are nearly as willing to fault a lack of parent involvement. Nearly half (47 percent) of public school parents say that lack of parent involvement is a major problem for schools in their community. Households with school employees are also concerned about this; 61 percent of this group consider lack of parental involvement to be a major problem for schools.

There are other problems facing the schools too. Overcrowded classrooms are frequently seen as a problem. 51 percent of Virginians cite classroom size as a major problem for local schools and another three in ten say it is a minor problem. For public school parents, overcrowded classrooms nose out other concerns as the most frequently cited problem. 53 percent of public school parents say overcrowded classrooms are a major problem for local schools and another almost three in ten (29 percent) say this is a minor problem.

“What’s remarkable here is that most people aren’t so concerned about the obvious players in the schools such as teachers and students. Instead, most people are concerned about the missing player--parents” said Cary Funk, Ph.D., Director of the Commonwealth Poll.

Is this a problem for public schools in your community?				
	Major problem	Minor problem	No problem	Don't Know/ No Answer
Lack of parent involvement	56%	27%	10%	7%
Overcrowded classrooms	51%	30%	11%	8%
Student use of alcohol/drugs	42%	35%	10%	14%
Violence in the schools	30%	48%	15%	7%
Poor quality teachers	26%	41%	24%	10%
Buildings unsafe/unhealthy	16%	41%	35%	8%

Character Education Important

A lack of parent involvement may be part of the problem but schools are often seen as part of the solution to shoring up the character and values of developing citizens. There is widespread agreement among Virginians that teaching character and values is an important mission for the schools in addition to teaching more academic subjects. More than seven in ten (72 percent) said this was very important and 22 percent thought it somewhat important. Virginians of all backgrounds and political persuasions endorse the idea that schools teach character and values.

While nearly everyone agrees that parents need a primary role in teaching character and values more than four in ten think responsibility for teaching character and values should be shared between parents and schools. 46 percent of Virginians feel parents and schools should have an equal responsibility and 53 percent feel only parents should have primary responsibility in this regard. Funk said “It’s surprising to see so many people viewing character education as within the purview of schools. This has not usually been considered a primary responsibility of the schools. The public may be looking for more help from the schools to take on character education as the gravity of problems facing young people in society has risen.”

William C. Boshier, Jr., Executive Director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute said, “There has always been a direct relationship between parent involvement and student performance. If we spend more time with our investments, we generally get a better return. Why shouldn’t this be true of our children?”

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

Now, I'm going to read a list of problems that schools might face. For each, please tell me whether this is a major problem, a minor problem, or no problem at all for public schools in your community. (Q.1-6 asked in randomized order.)

1. Buildings that are unsafe or unhealthy?

Major problem	16%
Minor problem	41
No problem at all	35
Don't Know/No Answer	8

2. Violence in the schools?

Major problem	30%
Minor problem	48
No problem at all	15
Don't Know/No Answer	7

3. Poor quality teachers?

Major problem	26%
Minor problem	41
No problem at all	24
Don't Know/No Answer	10

4. Overcrowded classrooms?

Major problem	51%
Minor problem	30
No problem at all	11
Don't Know/No Answer	8

5. Student use of alcohol or illegal drugs?

Major problem	42%
Minor problem	35
No problem at all	10
Don't Know/No Answer	14

6. Lack of parent involvement?

Major problem	56%
Minor problem	27
No problem at all	10
Don't Know/No Answer	7

7. Apart from teaching subjects like reading, math, or history, how important do you think it is for the public schools to teach students character and values--Very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not at all important?

Very important	72%
Somewhat important	22
Not very important	3
Not at all important	2
Don't Know/No Answer	2

8. Who should be responsible for teaching character and values--mostly parents, mostly schools, or should both have an equal responsibility for this?

Mostly parents	53%
Mostly schools	1
Both equally	46
Don't Know/No Answer	0

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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