



COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

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Opinion in Virginia Divided Over School Vouchers

Richmond, VA— As school voucher proposals continue to be debated around the nation, Virginians are divided in their opinion about vouchers, according to a new poll conducted by Virginia Commonwealth University. The Commonwealth Education Poll of 801 adults was conducted March 25-April 2 and has a margin of error of +/- 4 percentage points. The poll was conducted for the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute in the VCU School of Education. It was also sponsored in part by the Regional Educational Laboratory at AEL, Inc. The survey was conducted by the VCU Center for Public Policy.

Virginians' views on vouchers show a plurality of 47 to 44 percent in favor of giving parents vouchers to pay for their child's tuition at a private or parochial school of their choice. When asked their opinion of providing vouchers only for parents with children in schools that fail to meet state performance standards, opinion remained divided with a plurality (by 48 to 44 percent) opposed to the idea.

Vouchers are one of several proposals around the nation designed to increase school choice. The underlying reasons for public support of proposals increasing school choice are not entirely clear. Opinion in Virginia was closely divided when asked whether "parents need more school choice because the public schools aren't providing a good education." Fifty percent strongly or somewhat agree with this statement while 46 percent disagree, either strongly or somewhat. Reaction to this statement tracked closely with support or opposition to vouchers. Better than two thirds (69 percent) of those who support vouchers agree with this statement

while 28 percent disagree. By contrast, only 31 percent of those opposed to vouchers agree while two thirds disagree.

"Parents need more school choice because the public schools aren't providing a good education."				
	Agree strongly or somewhat	Disagree strongly or somewhat	Don't Know or No Answer	Number of cases
All	50%	46%	5%	801
Favor vouchers	69%	28%	3%	363
Oppose vouchers	31%	66%	4%	361

School choice was more likely to be linked with accountability. Better than two thirds of Virginians (67 percent) agree, either strongly or somewhat, that "giving parents more school choice will help the public schools be held accountable for performance." Twenty-eight percent strongly or somewhat disagree with this statement. Those in favor of vouchers were quite likely to agree with this statement; 87 percent agreed while only 10 percent disagreed that school choice helps accountability. Those opposed to vouchers were divided in response to this statement with 46 agreeing and 48 percent disagreeing.

"Giving parents more school choice will help the public schools be held accountable for performance."				
	Agree strongly or somewhat	Disagree strongly or somewhat	Don't Know or No Answer	Number of cases
All	67%	28%	5%	801
Favor vouchers	87%	10%	3%	363
Oppose vouchers	46%	48%	6%	361

William C. Boshier, Jr., dean of the VCU School of Education and executive director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute noted, "This poll suggests that Virginians want greater accountability in the schools but are divided over whether a voucher program is a reasonable mechanism."

Questions asked on the Commonwealth Education Poll
 March 25-April 2, 2003
 Number of respondents: 801

Vouchers and School Choice

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

Favor	47%
Oppose	44
Don't Know/No Answer	9

2001 Commonwealth Education Poll: 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?

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

Suppose vouchers were only available for parents with children enrolled in schools that fail to meet state performance standards. Would you favor or oppose giving this group of parents vouchers to pay for their child's tuition at a private, or parochial school of their choice?

Favor	44%
Oppose	48
Don't Know/No Answer	9

Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with the following statements?

(Next two questions were asked in random order.)

“Parents need more school choice because the public schools aren't providing a good education.”
 (Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement?)

Strongly agree	22%
Somewhat agree	28
Somewhat disagree	25
Strongly disagree	21
Don't Know/No Answer	5

“Giving parents more school choice will help the public schools be held accountable for performance.”

(Do you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement?)

Strongly agree	33%
Somewhat agree	34

Somewhat disagree	15
Strongly disagree	13
Don't Know/No Answer	6

METHOD 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 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 43% percent. Using the Council of American Survey Research Organization (CASRO) response rate calculations, interviews were obtained with respondents in 37% percent 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.cepionline.org/>.

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