



COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE April 7, 2004

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Virginians Consistent in Support for Education Funding

Richmond, VA—Budgetary pressures on state government have been particularly prominent in 2004. Public opinion related to funding for schools has been remarkably stable, however. A clear majority of Virginians (at 69 percent) believe that current funding for the schools is not enough to meet their needs while a fifth think funding is enough. Further, seven in ten believe that a funding cut to education would bring major changes to their local community schools, while 23 percent think schools could continue pretty much as they are now.

These are results from the new state-wide Commonwealth Education Poll of 803 adults. The poll was conducted March 3-10 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. The survey was conducted by the VCU Center for Public Policy.

Respondents were asked which services in education could be cut without hurting the quality of education. No particular service dominated public thinking as something that could be cut without hurting the quality of education. Almost half (48 percent) said they didn't know what could be cut or gave no answer to the question. Nearly two in ten (19 percent) said that nothing could be cut without hurting the quality of education (19 percent). The remaining third gave a response. Of those providing a response, the most frequent response related to extra-curricular activities such as sports and the fine arts, elective courses, or programs offered for special populations of children.

As further evidence of public support for funding in education, nearly six in ten Virginians (57 percent) say they would be willing to pay higher taxes in order to increase school funding while 36 percent are not willing to do so. This finding is consistent with the past years of Commonwealth Education Polls. Despite fluctuations in economic conditions over the past few years, about six in ten Virginians have consistently reported a willingness to pay higher taxes in order to increase funding for education since 2001.

As expected, willingness to pay higher taxes is related to beliefs about current funding adequacy. Those who think current funds are not enough are much more willing to pay higher taxes than those who think current funds are enough.

		Would you be willing or not willing to pay higher taxes so that school funding could be increased?				Number of cases
		Willing	Not willing	Don't know	No answer	
	School funding is not enough	69%	25%	3%	3%	550
	School funding is enough	28%	66%	2%	3%	156
All respondents		57%	36%	4%	3%	803

Those who were willing to pay higher taxes were also asked which of four kinds of tax increases would be preferred. A majority of this group prefers a sales tax increase over income, personal property, or real estate tax increases. Of those willing to pay higher taxes for a school funding increase, 58 percent would prefer a sales tax increase, 13 percent would prefer to increase income taxes, 15 percent would prefer to increase property taxes, and 7 percent would prefer to increase personal property taxes.

These findings are consistent with past Commonwealth Education Poll reports. The sales tax has been the preferred mechanism for increasing taxes by a clear majority or plurality of respondents over the past four years.

William C. Boshier, Jr., dean of the VCU School of Education and executive director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute observed, “Over the past four years, Virginians have consistently indicated that education is underfunded, consistently indicated they are willing to pay higher taxes, and consistently indicated a sales tax increase as an acceptable mechanism.”

A reported willingness to pay higher taxes in order to increase school funding is not the same thing as preferring a tax increase to other options. When asked to choose between a state

tax increase or program cuts, in the context of how the state could meet its education cost-sharing guidelines with localities, a majority (59 percent) chose budget cuts while three in ten chose tax increases. These results are consistent with findings from last year's Commonwealth Education Poll. Tax increases are typically hard to swallow from a citizen's perspective. While a clear majority of the public expresses support for education funding needs, public reaction to ways to increase that funding are more divided.

Respondents who preferred program cuts over tax increases were asked which programs they think should be cut. Better than six in ten (64 percent) could not name a specific program or area or gave no answer. Among those who named a specific program or area to cut, the more common responses were related to welfare and social service programs (11 percent). Some mentioned transportation programs (4 percent). Others wanted the elected officials to take a pay cut or cut back on perks (5 percent).

Bosher notes, "A majority of Virginians would prefer program cuts to tax increases if they had a choice but, it's interesting to note that less than half of those preferring a cut could name a specific program."

Questions asked on the Commonwealth Education Poll
March 3-10, 2004
Number of respondents: 803

School Funding

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

	2004	2003	2002	2001
Enough	20%	27%	23%	21%
Not enough	69	64	67	70
Don't Know/No Answer	11	9	9	10

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

	2004	2003	2002	2001
Willing	57%	61%	60%	57%
Not willing	36	34	34	36
Don't Know/No Answer	7	5	6	7

(ASK 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

	2004	2003	2002	2001
Sales tax	58%	54%	58%	47%
Income tax	13	14	14	16
Real estate property tax	15	13	10	16
Personal property tax	7	10	11	13
Don't Know/No Answer	7	10	6	9

Suppose state funding for education were cut, do you think the schools in your community would be able to continue pretty much as they are now, OR do you think this would bring major changes to the schools in your community?

	2004	2003
Would continue as they are now	23%	22%
Would bring major changes	70	70
Don't Know/No Answer	7	7

If state funding for education were cut, which services in education do you think could be reduced without hurting the quality of education?

Open-ended responses were coded into the categories below. First mentions only.

	Percent
Don't know	41%
No answer	7%
Nothing/Not anything	19%
Sports/Athletics	10%
Other extra-curricular/after school activities	5%
Music/Art	1%
Gym/Phys. Ed.	1%
Electives	1%
Administration/Administrative services	5%
Teachers assistants/Teachers	1%
Meals (school lunch/breakfast)	2%
Transportation	1%
SOL tests	1%
Computers/Computer classes	1%
Special programs/Gifted/AP/Alternative schools	1%
Special education	1%
Building and facilities	1%
Other	2%
Total	100%

The Virginia constitution requires the state to share the costs of public education with local governments. A report to the General Assembly said that the state is not paying as much for education as agreed to in the cost-sharing guidelines. This leaves local school districts paying more than expected. In order for the state to meet the education cost-sharing guidelines, would you prefer that the state increase taxes OR make cuts to other programs?

	2004	2003
Increase taxes	30%	32%

Make cuts to other programs	59	53
Don't Know/No Answer	11	14

There was a slight difference in question wording in 2003. The sentence "A report to the General Assembly..." was asked in 2003 as "A report by the General Assembly's investigative agency..."

(IF MAKE CUTS TO OTHER PROGRAMS) Which other programs do you think should be cut?

Open-ended responses were coded into the categories below. First mentions only.

OF THOSE WHO PREFER MAKING CUTS TO OTHER PROGRAMS	Percent
Don't know	55%
No answer	9%
Welfare programs	7%
Social services/Social services programs	4%
Transportation/Highway projects (VDOT)	4%
Decrease Legislator pay/perks	5%
Cut administrative/employee positions	1%
Pork barrel projects/Out-dated/Unnecessary programs	3%
Parks & Recreation	1%
Other specific programs	5%
None/Not anything	0%
Other responses	6%
Number of cases	468

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 42% percent. Using the Council of American Survey Research Organization (CASRO) response rate calculations, interviews were obtained with respondents in 36% 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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