



COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

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VCU POLL: LOCAL CONTROL PREFERRED ON WHEN TO OPEN SCHOOL

Also, fewer Virginians think SOL tests put too much pressure on students

RICHMOND, Va. (Dec. 16, 2005) – A majority of Virginians think the decision on whether to open schools before or after Labor Day should be made by local school divisions and not the state, according to a new Virginia Commonwealth University poll which also shows fewer people think Standards of Learning tests are putting too much pressure on students.

The Commonwealth Education Poll was administered by telephone to 803 adult Virginians from Oct. 17 through Oct. 27. It was conducted for the VCU Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute by the VCU Center for Public Policy/Survey and Evaluation Research Laboratory. The questions answered by respondents are subject to a sampling error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.

The poll shows a slight majority, 51 percent, believe local school divisions should decide when to start the school year, while 45 percent believe the state should continue to set the date. If local school divisions wanted to open before Labor Day, 56 percent of respondents said they would be in favor.

“Nearly 20 years after this law was adopted, debate continues in communities and legislatures in Virginia and other states with similar laws,” said Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute Executive Director Bill Boshier, Ed.D., a former Virginia Superintendent of Public Instruction. “While the focus of debate seems to be on setting the school calendar, in reality the issue is about local autonomy.”

Under a 1986 law, school divisions must obtain a waiver from the state to open before Labor Day. Waivers are granted to schools that lost eight days of school in five of the last 10 years or have dependent, shared, experimental or innovative programs.

In the 2004-2005 school year, 57 school divisions received waivers for inclement weather, 15 for dependent or shared programs, and seven for schools with experimental or innovative programs.

“The poll responses varied significantly depending on the race and region of the respondent,” said poll director David J. Urban, Ph.D.

A majority of whites, 55 percent, think local school divisions should set the opening date, while a majority of non-whites, 54 percent, think the state should set the date.

By region, 71 percent of respondents in Northwest Virginia, 62 percent in the west, and 56 percent in the north think the date should be set at the local level. Respondents in Tidewater (59 percent) and South Central Virginia (53 percent) think it should be set by the state. A majority of respondents in urban areas support the state setting the date,

while those in suburban and rural areas and small towns favor the decision being made at the local level.

When respondents were asked if the Standards of Learning tests are putting too much pressure on students, a declining majority – 51 percent – agreed. In 2004, 53 percent agreed; in 2002, 61 percent agreed.

To graduate from high school with a standard diploma, students are now required to pass certain SOL tests. Sixty-three percent of respondents believe the requirement is appropriate, up from 59 percent in 2004.

One main goal of the SOL testing program was to improve school accountability. Seventy-three percent of respondents either strongly agree or agree that the SOL tests hold schools accountable for student achievement, compared to 75 percent last year. “This result is consistent with past Commonwealth Education Polls,” said Urban.

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About the VCU Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute: A joint venture between the VCU School of Education and the VCU Center for Public Policy, the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute is committed to the expansion of public dialogue and participation in the important issues facing K-12 public education. The institute provides research, analysis, training and service to education policy-makers, school systems, citizens and the larger school community.

About VCU and the VCU Medical Center: Located on two downtown campuses in Richmond, Va., Virginia Commonwealth University is ranked nationally by the Carnegie Foundation as a top research institution and enrolls more than 29,000 students in more than 181 certificate, undergraduate, graduate, professional and doctoral programs in the arts, sciences and humanities in 15 schools and one college. Forty of the university’s programs are unique in Virginia, and 20 graduate and professional programs have been ranked by U.S. News & World Report as among the best of their kind. MCV Hospitals, clinics and the health sciences schools of Virginia Commonwealth University compose the VCU Medical Center, one of the leading academic medical centers in the country. For more, see www.vcu.edu.