

Do Americans Want School Choice, or After-school Religious Clubs?

Every September, as students and teachers return to the classroom, national opinion polls on public education are released. This year the polls have some interesting findings that may have a bearing on the education budget that is being developed in the Congress.

There are two major education polls widely discussed in the media. The oldest is the [Phi Delta Kappa Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward Public Schools](#) which has been conducted for 49 years. The other poll, [The EdNext Poll on School Reform](#), is developed by the conservative education journal, EdNext, with input from professors at Harvard and Stanford. While the EdNext poll has only been published for 11 years it is very informative because it breaks down the data by political party, parents, and teachers.

Mixed Support for Private School Options

This year there was some controversy in early September about differences between the two polls on their findings about public support for private schools. PDK reported that:

More Americans continue to oppose rather than favor using public funds to send students to private school (52% to 39%). And opposition rises — to 61% — when the issue is described in more detail.

However, the Ed Next Poll said that, *“opposition to school vouchers and tax credits to fund private-school scholarships has declined.”*

The differences in the two polls are no doubt related to the wording of the questions:

PDK's question was very generic, asking about support for

- “Allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense,” which garnered **39% support** and **52% opposition**.

EdNext asked different groups the question in five different ways to tease out more information.

They found that small changes in the wording elicited much different responses:

- “Tax-credit funded scholarships” – **55% support** to **24% opposition**.
- “Universal vouchers to provide all families with wider choice” – **45% support** to **37% opposition**.
- “Low income vouchers to provide low income families with wider choice” – **43% support** to **41% opposition**.
- “Universal vouchers using government funds to pay tuition” – **28% support** to **57% opposition**.
- “Low income vouchers using government funds to pay tuition” – **37% support** to **49% opposition**.

It is very clear here that the language of the question makes a big difference. In general, the public is more supportive of providing families with vouchers to widen choices than having the

government pay tuition. They are also slightly more supportive of providing the vouchers to all families than they are with limiting them to low income families. The favorite of all the proposals, supported by well over half of the public, is to use tax credits to fund school choice.

We can see here in these results that the public has been educated, probably through the various ballot measures they have voted on at the state and local levels, and have formed very specific opinions about the various funding mechanisms.

Local Control

EdNext also asked an important question about the appropriate level – federal, state or local -- to make decisions regarding “deciding how to fix failing schools,” “deciding whether or not a school is failing,” and “setting educational standards.” For each of these questions support for involvement of the federal government has eroded significantly over the past two years. For the first two questions, the public clearly thinks the state and local level is the place to make decisions about schools. There is some tepid support for setting academic standards at the national level (36%), but 45% support reserving this decision for states.

These responses indicate that public is growing in understanding that the federal government can do some things well, like providing hurricane relief and providing for the national defense, but is not to be trusted with other things like running public schools.

Federal Education Budget

What impact will all the variety of opinions held by the public on funding school choice have on the federal budget? Right now, the Senate and the House are working on two much different version of an education budget for next year. [Senate committees have produced a draft budget](#) that increases federal school funding by about \$29 million dollars, while [the House of Representatives passed an education budget](#) that cuts federal education spending by about \$2.3 billion. Neither of these budgets contains any funding for President Trump’s proposed school choice initiative. Perhaps the disparate results on the public polling and the lack of confidence the public has in the federal government exerting influence on local schools has warned the Congress off from moving toward a federal school voucher or tax credit program. This is troubling because the recent push for transgender acceptance in the public schools has pushed many parents with traditional values toward [thinking about private options for their children](#). Fortunately, even as public schools seem to be growing more and more secular there is another great option for those who would like to counter the secular bent – **after-school religious clubs**.

EdNext asked the public about religious clubs. They asked one half of their respondents if they were supportive of “religious students” organizing an after-school club. They asked the other half they asked if they were supportive of “Muslim students” organizing an after-school club. This was a question they had also asked in 2008, so it was possible to detect trends.

Support for Muslim clubs has risen dramatically, from 27% in 2008 to 45% in 2017. Support for religious students organizing clubs has declined slightly from 67% in 2008 to 65% in 2017.

Considering the huge cultural shifts that our nation has gone through over the past decade it is reassuring that about 2/3 of the public still think that after school religious clubs are a good idea and the Supreme Court has ruled that such clubs pass Constitutional muster. The growing support for Muslim clubs should not be a concern for Christians – they are just a subset of “religious clubs.”

We know that the Gospel when heard or read always has its intended effect (Isaiah 55:11), and that the intended affect is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek,” (Romans 1:16). After school clubs can be a viable way to empower students to share the Gospel with other students, and also have their own Christian values shored up through fellowship.

Odds and Ends from Around DC

Here is a [prayer for wisdom for President Trump](#) based on Proverbs 8 you may find helpful this month. Clearly the trying times our nation faces require supernatural wisdom.

CEAI is interested in your thoughts. Members are encouraged to enter comments below. Personal comments may be addressed to the author at JMitchell@ceai.org. John Mitchell is the Washington, DC Area Director for the Christian Educators Association.

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