



COMMONWEALTH EDUCATION POLL

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE May 09, 2002

Contact:

Cary Funk, Director of the Commonwealth Poll 804 827 1430 or clfunk@vcu.edu

William C. Boshier, Jr., Exec. Director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute 804 225-3290

Robert Holsworth, Director of the VCU Center for Public Policy 804 828 8033

Opinion on Vouchers Depends on the Framing

Richmond, VA— School vouchers are becoming a perennial issue in the national debate on education. Question wording has been shown to make a big difference in public opinion on vouchers, presumably because there are still many uncertainties in how vouchers would work. Virginia Commonwealth University's Commonwealth Education Poll asked, "Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school at public expense?" Virginians were opposed to this idea by 60 to 35 percent. Just a year ago, public opinion on vouchers looked quite different. At that time, half of Virginians were in favor and 40 percent opposed to vouchers when asked: "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?" The Commonwealth Education Poll was conducted April 24-May 2 with 804 adults; it has a margin of error of +/- 4 percentage points. The poll was conducted for the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute and sponsored in part by the Regional Educational Laboratory at AEL, Inc. The survey was conducted by the VCU Center for Public Policy.

The Commonwealth Education Poll replicated the wording used in the PDK/Gallup surveys taken nationwide. The results show that Virginians views on this issue are in sync with the nation as a whole. The 2001 PDK/Gallup survey found 62 percent of the nation opposed and 34 percent in favor of "allowing students and parents to choose a private school at public expense".

Republicans are more receptive to the idea of vouchers than are Democrats or independents. Among Republicans, 45 percent favored and 51 percent opposed vouchers. Two

thirds of Democrats were opposed with 28 percent in favor of vouchers. Independents were opposed to vouchers by 61 to 36 percent. Younger respondents are also more receptive to the idea of vouchers. Among those 18-29 years of age, 41 percent favored and 53 percent opposed this idea. These differences by political party and age are consistent with findings from a year ago using a quite different question to measure opinion on vouchers.

Beliefs About the Impact of Vouchers

To get a more reliable assessment of opinion on vouchers, it may be helpful to focus on public beliefs about the impact of vouchers. Virginians seem to accept some but not all of what voucher proponents claim. Vouchers are sometimes talked about as a system reform which could improve public school performance. A bare majority of Virginians are skeptical that vouchers will lead to improved school performance due to market competition; forty-four percent said school performance was likely to improve if vouchers were allowed, while 51 percent thought this was unlikely.

A majority of Virginians express some concern over the possibility of discrimination from vouchers. Fifty-seven percent agreed with the statement, “Vouchers could result in government funds being used for discrimination because private schools can select which students they want to admit.”

How will vouchers affect school choice? A majority of Virginians (60 percent) believe that allowing vouchers would make it likely that lower income parents have more choice in schools while 35 percent think this is unlikely. But when it comes to changing the pattern of users for private and public schools, Virginians are more divided. A slight plurality at 47 to 44 percent believe that only parents who already send their children to private schools will use vouchers if they are allowed. Beliefs about the likely impact of vouchers tend to match up with overall support for vouchers; those who favor the idea of vouchers tend to see more positive implications and those who oppose vouchers are more skeptical about the likely impact of vouchers.

*“The public schools will improve performance
because of more competition from private schools.”*

	Likely	Unlikely	Don't know No answer	Number of cases
All Respondents	44%	51%	5%	804

Favor Vouchers	70%	26%	3%	289
Oppose Vouchers	29%	67%	4%	468

*“Lower income parents will have more choice
in deciding which school is best for their child.”*

	Likely	Unlikely	Don't know No answer	Number of cases
All Respondents	60%	35%	5%	804
Favor Vouchers	83%	16%	1%	289
Oppose Vouchers	47%	48%	6%	468

*“For the most part, only parents who already
send their children to private schools will use vouchers.”*

	Likely	Unlikely	Don't know No answer	Number of cases
All Respondents	47%	44%	9%	804
Favor Vouchers	38%	57%	5%	289
Oppose Vouchers	53%	37%	10%	468

Opinion on Vouchers for Private vs. Religious-Based Private Schools

The poll tested two versions of the question wording using the split half technique. Half the sample was asked whether they favored or opposed the choice of a “private school” at public expense and the other half the sample was asked about a “religious-based private school”. The explicit mention of religious-based schools did not substantially alter opinions. Opposition to the “private school” question was 59 to 36 percent and that to the “religious-based private school” question was 60 to 34 percent. The combined responses of 60 percent opposed to 35 percent in favor are cited above since the differences by question wording are not statistically significant.

William C. Boshier, Jr., executive director of the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute, said, “These results suggest that public reaction to the idea of vouchers is not likely to hinge on the separation of church and state issue. This is particularly interesting given the controversy in Ohio over the legality of allowing vouchers for religious-based private schools, currently waiting a decision from the United States Supreme Court.”

Questions asked on the Commonwealth Education Poll
Virginia Commonwealth University
April 24 - May 2, 2002
Number of Respondents: 804

HALF SAMPLE: Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school at public expense?

Favor	36%
Oppose	59
Don't Know/No Answer	5

HALF SAMPLE: Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a religious-based private school at public expense?

Favor	34%
Oppose	60
Don't Know/No Answer	7

Each of the above questions was asked of a randomly selected half the sample. There were no statistically significant differences in response between the two question versions.

COMBINED RESPONSES

	2002
	Virginia
Favor	35%
Oppose	60
Don't Know/No Answer	5

PDK/Gallup 2001 asked a nationwide sample: Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school at public expense?

	Nationwide
Favor	34%
Oppose	62
Don't Know/No Answer	4

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

Vouchers would give parents education tax credits to pay for their child's tuition at a private or parochial school of their choice. There are many different ideas about what vouchers would do. For each of the following please tell me if you think this likely or unlikely to occur if vouchers are allowed. First,

The next 3 questions were asked in randomized order.

The public schools will improve performance because of more competition from private schools.
(Is this likely or unlikely to occur if vouchers are allowed?)

Likely	44%
Unlikely	51
Don't Know/No Answer	5

Lower-income parents will have more choice in deciding which school is best for their child.
(Is this likely or unlikely to occur if vouchers are allowed?)

Likely	60%
Unlikely	35

Don't Know/No Answer	5
----------------------	---

For the most part, ONLY parents who already send their children to private schools will use vouchers.
(Is this likely or unlikely to occur if vouchers are allowed?)

Likely	47%
Unlikely	44
Don't Know/No Answer	9

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

Vouchers could result in government funds being used for discrimination because private schools can select which students they want to admit.

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

Strongly agree	27%
Somewhat agree	30
Somewhat disagree	19
Strongly disagree	16
Don't Know/No Answer	8

People who don't like the public schools have the choice to use private schools or home schooling right now, even if vouchers are not allowed.

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

Strongly agree	39%
Somewhat agree	39
Somewhat disagree	9
Strongly disagree	7
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 49 percent. Using the CASRO response rate calculations, interviews were obtained with respondents in 42 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/>.

####