



PHOTO / MARTHA STEWART

No Matter How You Ask the Question

School vouchers rebounded in 2011

Thus far, 2011 has been a good year for private school choice. The Supreme Court reversed a lower-court decision that was about to shut down the Arizona tax-credit program. President Obama signed into law a bill that revived the District of Columbia voucher program his Democratic friends had struck down two years earlier. In 36 states, 52 voucher and tax credit bills are in the legislative hopper, and some may be on the verge of passage, says Robert Enlow of the Foundation for Educational Choice. Indiana, Wisconsin, Georgia, and Oklahoma have either opened the door to greater choice or seem poised to do so.

Of course, state courts have yet to weigh in on all the new legislation, and in the past they have proved an even greater obstacle than state legislatures. But in the court of public opinion, vouchers are waging something of a comeback, according to results from the *Education Next*-PEPG Survey released in this issue.

In the past, our annual poll has been nothing but “Bad News Bears” for vouchers. Over the four years between 2007 and 2010, support for vouchers slipped from 45 percent to 31 percent among those who were asked whether they favored or opposed “a proposal...that would use government funds to pay the tuition of low-income students who choose to attend private schools.” Those expressing opposition to such a proposal increased from 34 percent to 43 percent over that period of time. Each year, the news got worse for voucher enthusiasts. It seemed as if Milton Friedman’s idea was going the way of the buggy whip.

But in 2011, voucher support among the general public revived noticeably. Thirty-nine percent now say they support vouchers, an 8-percentage-point reversal from the 31 percent support the idea received just a year ago. Opposition to vouchers slipped by 5 percentage points.

The news from the *Education Next* poll had become so bad we were accused of asking an unfriendly voucher question (it referenced the “use” of “government funds to pay the tuition”), so we agreed to split our respondents into two equivalent groups and ask the second group a “friendly” voucher question instead: “A proposal has been made that would give low-income families with children in public schools a wider choice, by allowing them to enroll their children in private schools instead, with government helping to pay the tuition.” The idea conveyed by the two questions is essentially the same, but the wording—“wider choice,” “government helping”—is more positive than the wording in the “unfriendly” question. When the question is posed in a friendlier manner, vouchers, even on their darkest day (2010), gathered support from another 8 percent, with 39 percent in favor and just 32 percent opposed.

So which question tells us the truth about public opinion? Both, probably, if you look at trends over time rather than at the percentage in any given year. When the public was asked the friendly question in 2011, support for vouchers climbed to 47 percent, 8 percent over the previous year, the same amount of gain revealed by the unfriendly question.

So both questions show an 8 percent turnaround for vouchers. Rather than continuing to head downhill, vouchers are the “comeback kid.” We suspect vouchers gained in public favor because Republicans are in a better position to promote the idea, just as Obama’s opposition to vouchers had probably induced the slide in support between 2008 and 2010. In 2011, the shoe switched feet.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul E. Peterson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

— Paul E. Peterson

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but *Education Next* partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.
