

COMMON CORE BRAND TAINTS OPINION ON STANDARDS

2016 FINDINGS AND 10-YEAR TRENDS FROM THE *EDNEXT* POLL

THE YEAR 2016 MARKS THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY of the *Education Next* poll on K–12 education policy, offering us the opportunity to take a retrospective look at public opinion on this vital topic. In 8 of the past 10 years, we have also surveyed teachers on the subject and have seen some interesting differences between the thinking of these educators and the public at large. And this year, given that public opinion on many national issues is riven by partisan disparities, we compare and contrast the views of Republicans and Democrats.

On many topics, we find that opinion has remained consistent over the past 10 years. We see only slight changes in people's views on the quality of the nation's schools, for instance, or on federally mandated testing, charter schools, tax credits to support private school choice, merit pay for teachers, or the effects of teachers unions. But on other issues, opinions have changed significantly.

Support for the Common Core State Standards has fallen to a new low in 2016. So has public backing for school vouchers—both those limited to low-income families and those made available to all families. Support for teacher tenure has declined, but approval for teacher salary hikes has climbed to levels not seen since the U.S. recession of 2008 among respondents who are not told current salary levels. Also, people think better of their local public schools in 2016 than they did in 2007.

On numerous issues, a partisan divide persists. From Common Core and charter schools to merit pay and teacher tenure, from school spending and teacher salaries to union impact on schools, the opinions of Democrats differ in predictable ways from those held by Republicans. But the partisan differences do not always follow the patterns that political leaders might expect. Surprisingly, school vouchers targeted toward low-income

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ILLUSTRATION / JOHN WEBER



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families command greater backing among Democrats than Republicans. The same is true for tax credits for donations to fund scholarships for students from low-income families who attend private school. Even universal vouchers for all students garner greater support among Democrats than Republicans.

Other results from the 2016 survey are no less intriguing. We shall see, for example, that members of the public, on average, think that 15% of all teachers at their local schools are performing at an unsatisfactory level. What's more, teachers themselves, on average, think that 10% of their colleagues are unsatisfactory. People also remain adamantly opposed to policies that mandate equal suspension and expulsion rates across racial lines, despite ongoing efforts by the Obama administration to move public education in this direction. All this, and more, is spelled out in the following discussion and in two interactive graphics at educationnext.org.

Common Core, Accountability, and Testing

Public thinking on these issues is complex. On one hand, Americans continue to support state and federal policies that require schools to assess student progress toward meeting state-designated performance standards. On the other, they are steadily turning against the most prominent initiative to do just that—the Common Core State Standards.

Common Core. For several years *EdNext* has gauged public support for Common Core by asking the following question:

As you may know, in the last few years states have been deciding whether or not to use the Common Core, which are standards for reading and math that are the same across the states. In the states that have these standards they will be used to hold public schools accountable for their performance. Do you support or oppose the use of the Common Core standards in your state?

In 2012, the first year *EdNext* inquired about Common Core, 90% of those who took one side or the other said they favored the standards. But as shown in Figure 1a, it fell to just 50% in 2016. Republicans have made the largest shift. Their backing plummeted from 82% in 2013 to 39% in 2016. Democratic support has fallen to 60%. Still, Democrats, unlike Republicans, are more likely to back than to oppose Common Core. (As detailed in the methodological sidebar, all the percentages reported in this essay exclude respondents who are neutral on any given question.) Meanwhile, teacher opinion on the Common Core roughly parallels that of the public as a whole.

For several years *EdNext* has studied public response to

the name “Common Core” as distinct from opinion about the general concept of uniform state standards. To do so, we have divided respondents into two equal and randomly selected groups, asking one group the above question and the other an otherwise identical question that refers to “standards that are the same” rather than to Common Core. Differences in the responses to the two questions reveal that the Common Core “brand” holds a negative connotation for many people: every year, support for using the same standards in general is higher than it is for Common Core in particular (see Figure 1b). Teacher opinion is less influenced by the brand name. Even when the Common Core name is not mentioned, only 50% of teachers say they approve of uniform standards.

Testing and parental opt-out. The public's commitment to the use of standardized tests to assess students and schools has not declined. When people are asked whether the federal government should continue the requirement that all students be tested in math and reading in each grade from 3rd through 8th and at least once in high school, nearly four out of five respondents say they favor the policy. The percentage of people who oppose letting parents opt their children out of state tests is almost as high: 70% come down against opt-out. Those percentages remain nearly as high as in 2015.

On these issues, teachers' views again differ somewhat from the public's. Only about half of teachers like the idea of continuing the federal requirement that all students in certain grades be tested. And, the percentage of teachers who think parents should be allowed to have their children opt out of tests increased from 36% to 43% between 2015 and 2016.

In short, one cannot summarily claim that people are turning against similar standards and tests throughout the United States. Even though they are not convinced that Common Core is the answer, they are still inclined to approve of the general idea of one framework for assessing students and schools across the states. This broader idea may well have a longer shelf life among the public—if perhaps not among teachers—than the Common Core brand.

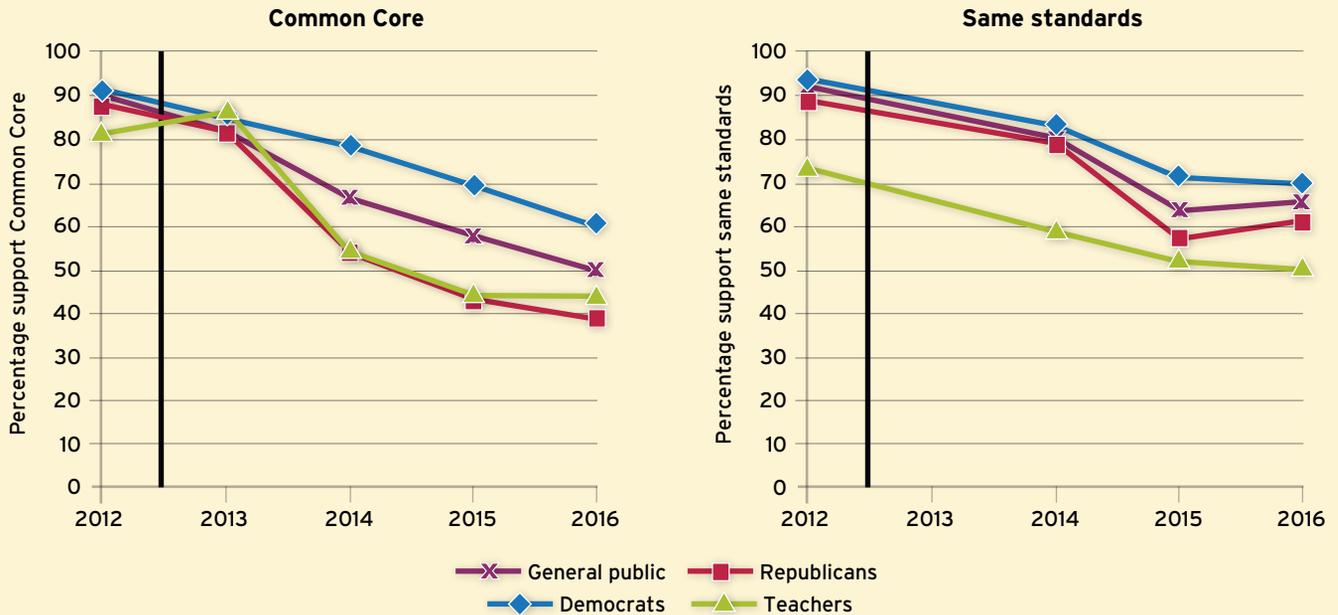
School Choice

Opinion on school choice issues is full of surprises for those who think that members of the public blindly follow their political leaders—or, for that matter, that elected officials hew closely to the views of their party's base. Republican support for vouchers and tuition tax credits is slipping, creating a partisan cleavage in the electorate that is the opposite of the divide observed among Democratic and Republican elected officials.

Support for Common Core Erodes (Figure 1)

(1a) The drop in the public’s support for Common Core has reached a point where supporters no longer outnumber opponents. Republicans have made the largest shift away from Common Core over the past four years. The opinion of teachers has stabilized since 2015.

(1b) Two-thirds of the public express support for uniform standards when they are not labeled as Common Core. The decline in support is less than when the label is provided.



Question for Figure 1a: As you may know, in the last few years states have been deciding whether or not to use the Common Core, which are standards for reading and math that are the same across the states. In the states that have these standards, they will be used to hold public schools accountable for their performance. Do you support or oppose the use of the Common Core standards in your state?

Question for Figure 1b omits the term Common Core.

NOTE: Percentages are for those taking a side on the issue by saying they either “strongly” or “somewhat” supported or opposed the policy; those giving the neutral response—“neither support nor oppose”—are omitted. In the 2007 through 2012 surveys, the neutral category was placed as the middle option among five response categories. Beginning in 2013, the neutral category was placed as the fifth option, a change indicated in the figure with a vertical black line. Trends that take place across the black line could be due to this change in the survey’s design. No marker on lines in years when question not asked.

Opinion with respect to charter schools has also become more polarized, but here the growing opposition among Democrats parallels the intensifying resistance to charters by many state legislatures dominated by that party.

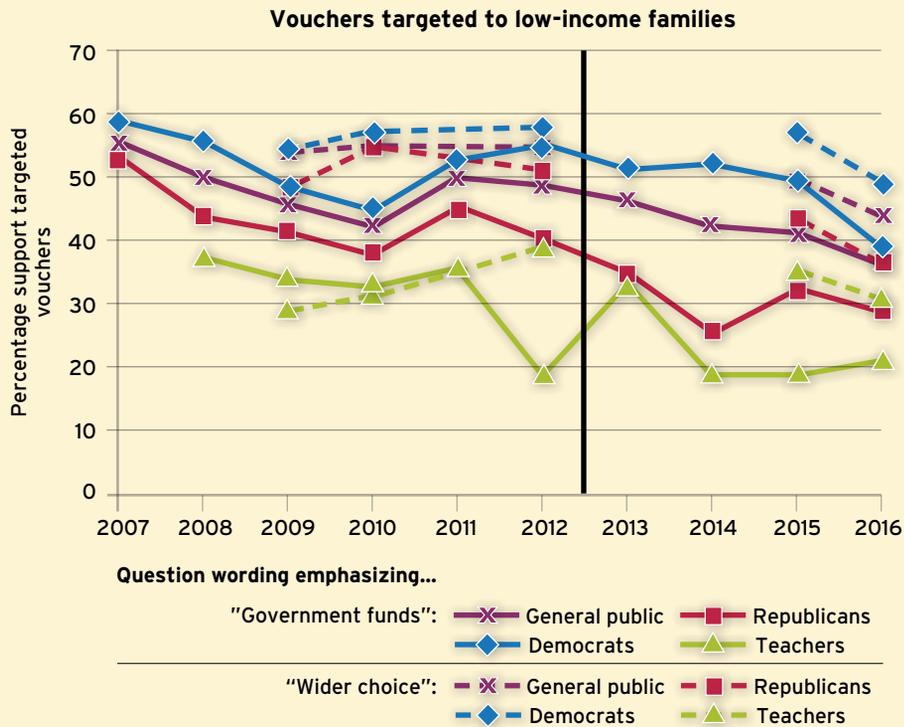
School vouchers. Among members of the public, more Democrats than Republicans favoring school vouchers targeted toward low-income families, a fact that few analysts have recognized. A major shift against vouchers has taken place within the ranks of both political parties and among the public as a whole. Between 2012 and 2016, support for targeted vouchers,

as indicated by responses to a question emphasizing the wider choice that vouchers offer to parents, fell from 55% to 43% among the public as a whole, from 58% to 49% among Democrats, and from 51% to 37% among Republicans (see Figure 2a).

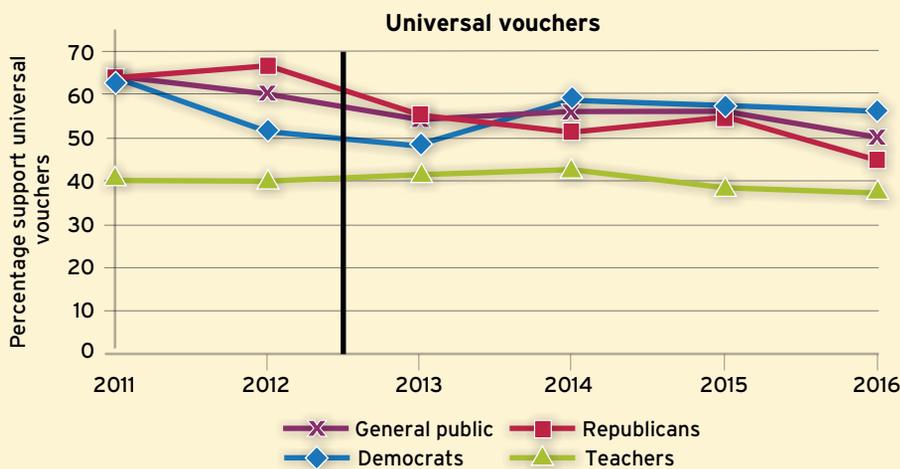
The popularity of vouchers for all families (universal vouchers) has also trended downward (see Figure 2b). In 2014, such vouchers were favored by 56% of the public; in 2016 the figure stands at just 50%. Fifty-one percent of Republicans favored them in 2014, but only 45% do in 2016. Meanwhile, Democratic support for universal vouchers has increased from 49% in 2013 to a level of

Major Shift against Vouchers (Figure 2)

(2a) Between 2012 and 2016, the decline in support for targeted vouchers, as indicated by responses to a question emphasizing the wider choice vouchers offer to parents, was from 55% to 43% for the public as a whole. Democrats back vouchers targeted to low-income families at higher rates than Republicans do.



(2b) In 2014, 56% of the public favored universal vouchers, but that percentage has declined to 50% by 2016. While Democratic support has increased since 2013, Republican backing has waned.



NOTE: For question wording, please see <http://educationnext.org/files/2016ednextpoll.pdf>. Also, see note to Figure 1.

56% in 2016. Remarkably, Democrats in 2016 are 11 percentage points more supportive of universal vouchers than Republicans are.

Any explanation for these trends is of course speculative. But the lower level of support among Republicans may reflect the tension between the party's ideals and the material interests of its constituents. As conservatives, Republicans generally espouse the extension of free markets. But many Republicans already have choice. Those who can afford to reside in affluent suburban areas can choose where they live and thus which schools their children will attend.

The focus of the school voucher movement has aggravated the tension between these material interests and conservative ideals. By making equal opportunity a central theme of the movement, organizations such as the BAEO, the Friedman Foundation (established by Milton and Rose Friedman and now known as EdChoice), Democrats for Education Reform, and other groups favoring school choice have put Republican support at risk by emphasizing the role that vouchers can play in opening school doors to the disadvantaged.

On the other hand, this emphasis on equal opportunity holds appeal for racial and ethnic groups that comprise a significant part of the Democratic constituency. The large numbers of blacks and Hispanics who identify themselves as Democrats help explain the greater support for vouchers among Democrats than among Republicans. Indeed, it may be said that on this issue the Democratic Party is divided between two of its key constituencies—teachers on one side, minority groups on the other.

Tuition tax credits. Half of the states now have either a school-voucher program or a similar initiative that uses the tax code to subsidize the opportunity to attend a private school, according to EdChoice. A



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common form of tax credit allows businesses or individuals to contribute to organizations that distribute private-school scholarships to low-income families.

In 2016, 65% of people offering an opinion on tax credits say they favor them, making this mechanism the most popular kind of school choice. Although substantial majorities support tax credits, the policy finds greater favor among Democrats, at 69%, than among Republicans, at 60%. Meanwhile, just 47% of teachers favor tax credits.

Charter schools. The first charter school was formed in Minnesota in 1992, and by 2007 charters were educating about 2% of the public school population nationwide. Today it is estimated that nearly 6% of public school students attend charters. Despite this growth, overall public opinion on charter schools has not changed much since 2008 (see Figure 3). Before 2013, support for charters ranged between 70% and 73%. From 2013 on, charter support has hovered between 67% and 65%. Despite this modest dip, we do not conclude that there has been any real change in public opinion, because the downward shift between 2012 and 2013 could simply have been a function of our moving the neutral response option in 2013 (see methodology sidebar).

Although public opinion is stable, support for charters is substantially greater among Republicans than among Democrats. Republican support for charters has remained steady throughout the decade, and in 2016 it stands at 74%. Democratic support for charters slipped from 72% in 2008 to 63% in 2012, but it has remained steady since 2013, registering at 59% that year and 58% in 2016.

Teacher Performance and Policies

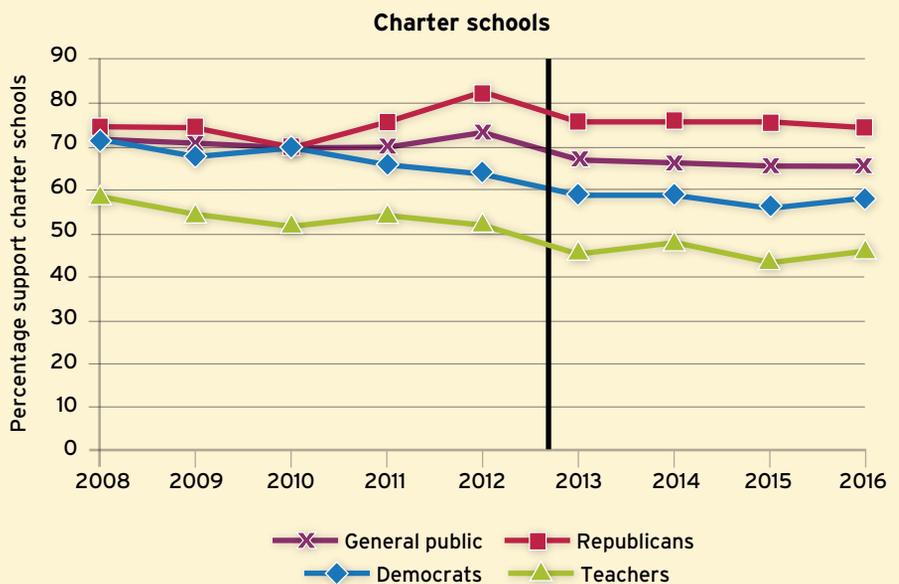
Teacher evaluations. Over the past five years, most states have overhauled their approach to teacher evaluation. Spurred by the Obama administration's Race to the Top

grant competition and later by its No Child Left Behind waiver program, states have adopted policies requiring that teachers be rated on ordered scales, and on multiple performance categories. These policy changes, however, have not transformed the results of teacher evaluations. In 2016, Matt Kraft of Brown University and Allison Gilmour of Vanderbilt studied the ratings teachers received from new evaluation systems in 19 states. In only three states did the fraction of teachers receiving an unsatisfactory or ineffective rating exceed 1%, and in not one state was it greater than 4%.

Do members of the public hold a similarly sanguine view of teachers? We asked respondents in the 2016 *EdNext* survey to indicate the percentage of teachers in their local schools

Partisan Divide on Charters (Figure 3)

Among Republicans, support for charters has remained steady since 2013, and stands at 74% among those taking a side on this issue in 2016. Democratic support for charters, although equally persistent, stands at just 58% in 2016.



Question: Many states permit the formation of charter schools, which are publicly funded but are not managed by the local school board. These schools are expected to meet promised objectives, but are exempt from many state regulations. Do you support or oppose the formation of charter schools?

NOTE: See note to Figure 1.

they would assign to each of four categories: unsatisfactory, satisfactory, good, and excellent. Respondents report that they think 15% of teachers are unsatisfactory—far more than the maximum of 4% that were so deemed by the new state evaluation systems. Not surprisingly, teachers express somewhat more positive views of their colleagues’ performance than members of the general public do, but even they report that 10% of their fellow teachers are performing at an unsatisfactory level.

Merit pay and tenure. In general, people broadly support merit pay and oppose teacher tenure. Asked their opinion on “basing part of the salaries of teachers on how much their students learn,”

60% express support. The share of the public supporting merit pay has remained relatively constant since we first asked this question in 2008. Meanwhile, teachers remain largely united in opposition to the concept of merit pay, with just 20% expressing support. The gap of 40 percentage points in support between teachers and the broader public is the widest that we observe on any issue in our 2016 survey.

Asked about their support for “giving tenure to teachers,” just 31% of those offering an opinion express a favorable view. Support has declined by 10 percentage points since 2013, suggesting that opinion has shifted in response to the media attention the issue has received during the ongoing *Vergara v. California*

METHODOLOGY

THE RESULTS PRESENTED HERE are based upon a nationally representative, stratified sample of adults (age 18 and older) and representative oversamples of the following subgroups: parents with school-age children living in their home (1,571) and teachers (609). Total sample size is 4,181. Respondents could elect to complete the survey in English or Spanish. Survey weights were employed to account for nonresponse and the oversampling of specific groups.

The survey was conducted from May 6 to June 13, 2016, by the polling firm Knowledge Networks (KN), a GfK company. KN maintains a nationally representative panel of adults (obtained via address-based sampling techniques) who agree to participate in a limited number of online surveys.

In general, survey responses based on larger numbers of observations are more precise, that is, less prone to sampling variance than those made across groups with fewer numbers of observations. As a consequence, answers attributed to the national population are more precisely estimated than are those attributed to groups. The margin of error for binary responses given by the full sample in the *EdNext* survey is roughly 1.5 percentage points for questions on which opinion is evenly split. The specific number of respondents varies from question to question due to item nonresponse and to the fact that, in the cases of several items, we randomly divided the sample into multiple groups in order to examine the effect of variations in the way questions were posed. The exact wording of each question is displayed at www.educationnext.org/edfacts. Percentages reported in the figures and online tables do not always sum to 100 as a result of rounding to the nearest percentage point.

The *EdNext* survey often asks respondents to indicate whether they strongly support, somewhat support, somewhat

oppose, or strongly oppose an idea or policy. They are also offered a fifth choice: “neither support nor oppose,” a category similar to (but not quite the same as) the “don’t know” category used by some other surveys.

In our previous reports on the poll, we have ordinarily provided information on 1) the combined percentages of those somewhat or strongly in favor, 2) the combined percentages of those strongly and somewhat opposed, and 3) the percentage taking the neutral position. That information is available in interactive graphics for 2015 and 2016 and in tabular form for all previous years at www.educationnext.org/edfacts. In the figures and discussion presented in this essay, however, we disregard all the neutral-position responses and calculate the percentage favoring or opposing a policy as a proportion of only those taking a position on one side or another of the issue. Not much is lost by taking this step, and one definite benefit is obtained: one can capture the relative balance of support and opposition for any given year in a single number, allowing one to see how opinion is trending (or not) over time. But we caution the reader not to compare numbers from previous essays to those in our figures documenting trends, as the earlier numbers calculate support for a policy as a percentage of all respondents, including those taking the neutral position.

A further word of caution: In the 2007 through 2012 surveys, the neutral response was presented as the middle option among the five response categories. Beginning in 2013, the neutral response was made the fifth option, a change that reduces the number selecting that neutral alternative. In ignoring the neutral responses in our analysis, we assume that those selecting this category, if forced to choose, would distribute themselves in the same proportions as those actually taking a position. All trends that cross the 2012 boundary reflect this assumption, even when the proportion of neutral responses changes significantly. Therefore, these trends must be interpreted with care. In the figures, we drop a sharp vertical line through the graphs in order to remind the reader to use caution when interpreting trends that cross the time boundary. Our discussions in the text look at trends prior to 2013 separately from those after that date.



People tend to seriously underestimate both school expenditures and teacher pay, and if respondents are told how much is actually being spent in their school district, they become less enthusiastic about increasing the amount.

litigation over the constitutionality of tenure (see “Reaping the Whirlwind,” *legal beat*, Fall 2016). The public’s opposition to tenure contrasts with 67% support among teachers themselves.

Teachers unions. Members of the public appear to be evenly divided in their thinking about the influence of teachers unions, with 49% of those who take a position saying they have a generally positive effect on schools. Meanwhile, teachers overwhelmingly have favorable views of the unions that represent them, with 76% reporting that unions have a generally positive effect. Moreover, teachers’ views of their unions have trended in a more favorable direction since 2013, when just 64% gave a positive response. Predictably, Democratic and Republican views diverge, with 65% of the former and just 31% of the latter saying that unions have a positive effect on schools.

Grading Schools

Every year since 2007, *EdNext* has asked people to evaluate public schools at both the national and the local levels on the A-to-F scale traditionally used to grade students. Respondents always give much higher grades to schools in their communities than to schools in the nation as a whole. When asked about local schools in 2016, for example, 55% of respondents give them either an A or a B and only 13% give them a D or an F, with the rest handing out the diplomatic C. But when grading the nation’s schools, only 25% of the respondents award them an A or a B, while 22% assign either a D or an F. In short, local schools receive more than twice as many high grades as the nation’s schools do.

Apparently people prefer the familiar to the less well known and the proximate to the distant. What’s more, people tend to hear mostly good news about their community schools and almost all glum news about the nation’s schools in general. A Google search on “America’s schools” results in headlines such as “America’s Schools Are Falling Apart,” “Why America’s Schools Have a Money Problem,” and “The Real Reason America’s Schools Stink.” But a search for the term “local schools” turns up the websites of specific local school systems and a website rating “great schools.”

Racial Disparities in Discipline

In January 2014, the Obama administration’s Department of Justice and Department of Education jointly sent each school district a “Dear Colleague” letter urging local officials to

avoid racial bias when suspending or expelling students. The letter said that districts risked legal action, even if their school-discipline policies were neutral on their face, if those policies had an unintended “disparate impact, i.e., a disproportionate and unjustified effect on students of a particular race.”

Do members of the public support policies that prevent disparities in suspensions and expulsions? And has the level of support changed over the past year? To find out, we asked respondents in both 2015 and 2016 whether they supported or opposed “federal policies that prevent schools from expelling or suspending black and Hispanic students at higher rates than other students.”

In 2015, only 29% said they favored a policy that prevented racial disparities in disciplinary policy, while 71% opposed it. Despite public debate over the past year, those percentages remain essentially unchanged in 2016—72% against, just 28% in favor.

Teachers are just as negative about federal attempts to eliminate racial disparities in disciplinary practices. In both 2015 and 2016, no fewer than 72% of teachers said they were opposed.

There is some sign that the policy has lost ground even among African Americans. In 2015, 65% of black respondents expressed support for the idea, but that percentage fell to 48% in 2016. Among Hispanic respondents in 2016, 39% express support, about the same as one year ago.

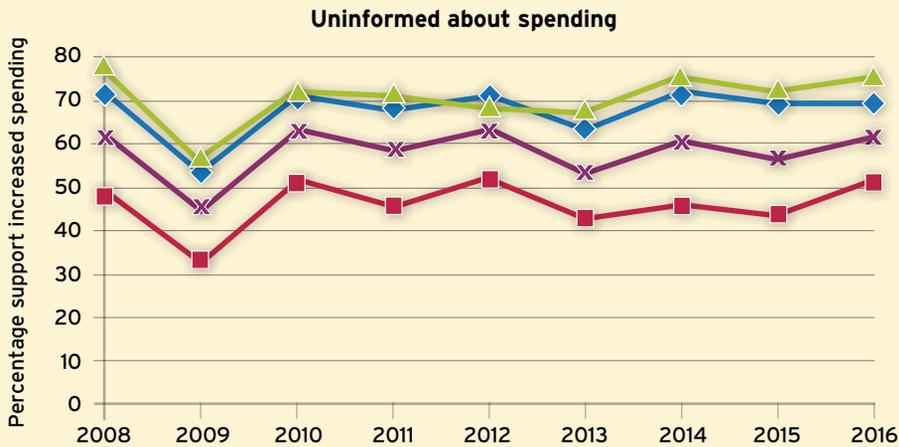
Financing Education

It appears that the American people need a primer in school finance. A clear majority of respondents favor higher levels of per pupil expenditure and higher teacher salaries. But people tend to seriously underestimate both school expenditures and teacher pay. If respondents are told how much is actually being spent in their school district, they become less enthusiastic about increasing the amount; if they are told the average teacher salary in their state, they are less inclined to favor a pay raise.

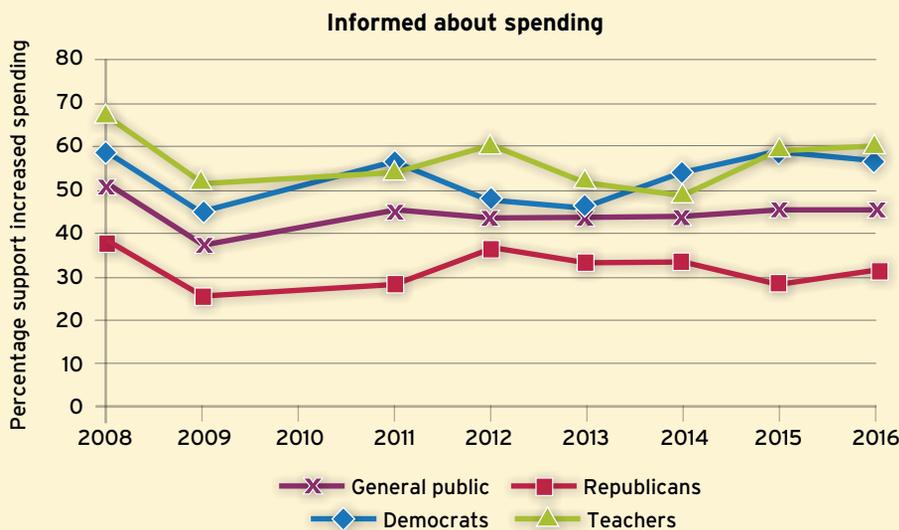
Current expenditures per pupil. When we asked respondents to estimate per pupil spending in their local school district, the average response in 2016 was \$7,020, little more than 50% of the actual per pupil expenditure of \$12,440, on average, in the districts in which respondents lived. That underestimation may color people’s thinking as to whether or not expenditures should go up. In 2016, when a

Spending Reality Check (Figure 4)

(4a) Among members of the public not provided information about current spending levels, preferences for higher spending rebounded almost as soon as the economy showed signs of stabilizing after the 2009 recession.



(4b) Among members of the public given information on current expenditure levels, however, support for increased spending remains much lower and has picked up only modestly after 2009. The level of support among this informed segment of the public was still only 45 percent in 2016.



Question for Figure 4a: Do you think that government funding for public schools in your district should increase, decrease, or stay about the same?

Question for Figure 4b: According to the most recent information available, \$[insert number] is being spent each year per child attending public schools in your district. Do you think that government funding for public schools in your district should increase, decrease, or stay about the same?

NOTE: No marker on line in years when question not asked.

random selection of respondents were asked if spending in their school district should be increased (as opposed to either being cut or remaining at current levels), 61% supported the idea (see Figure 4a). But in another random group, in which people were first told their district's current level of school expenditures, only 45% favored an increment (see Figure 4b).

Whether or not respondents are informed of actual spending, they seem to prefer lower expenditures when the country enters a serious recession, as happened from late 2007 to mid-2009. In 2009, support for increased spending fell sharply from 2008 levels. In subsequent years, preferences for higher spending revived for both the uninformed and the informed groups.

The partisan divide on this issue seems quite secure, running at 20 percentage points or more nearly every year among both those not informed and those informed of current expenditure levels.

Teacher salaries. Just as per pupil spending is much higher than people think, so is the average teacher paid much better than members of the public estimate. When respondents were asked in 2016 to estimate the average teacher salary in their state, their guesses were, on average, 30% lower than the \$57,000 average teacher pay reported by the National Education Association, the organization that collects the best available information on this topic.

Inasmuch as people, on average, think teacher salaries are quite low, it should come as no surprise to learn that a strong majority of respondents think they should rise. In 2016, when we asked a randomly selected subgroup of our respondents whether teacher salaries should increase, 65% favored the idea. But when members of another random subgroup were first told the average teacher salary in



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their state, only 41% wanted to hand out pay raises. The same pattern obtains among Democratic and Republican partisans.

After the U.S. recession took hold in 2008, support for increases in teachers' salaries among both uninformed and informed groups of respondents declined sharply. Among the uninformed, the share in favor of an increase fell by 14 percentage points in 2009 from a high of 69% attained in 2008. Among the group of people who were told current teacher salaries in their state, support fell from 54% to 40%.

Among those who were told current teacher salaries in their state, support did not begin to increase again until 2014 and has never recovered to its 2008 levels, remaining just 41% in 2016.

Conclusions

We draw seven main conclusions from our multiyear survey of public and teacher opinions on a broad range of educational issues:

1) *Uniform national standards and tests of student performance against those standards gather broader public backing than do the specific sets of standards and tests known as the Common Core.* In earlier polls, we found a similar diminution of support for federally mandated testing and accountability when that policy was translated into No Child Left Behind, a federal law that had numerous specific components. Even if members of the public buy into a broad principle, programs that operationalize that principle can suffer "death by a thousand cuts."

2) *Different school choice programs command different levels of public support, and that support can fade with time.* A decade ago, school vouchers targeted toward low-income students commanded the backing of a substantial plurality of the public. That is no longer so, perhaps in part because targeted voucher programs remain small, fragile, and underfunded. Meanwhile, charter schools, appearing on the scene at roughly the same time, have expanded steadily, with 6% of the student population now attending one. Although public backing for charters is polarized along party lines, the level of support remains high overall, at nearly 2-to-1 margins. A more recent school-choice idea, tuition tax credits, could be at risk. While the concept remains popular with the public today, one wonders whether the current level of support will persist if tax credit programs don't soon become more prevalent across the country.

3) *People are less inclined to spend more when they find out how much is currently devoted to school spending.* In nearly

every year over the past decade (and in every year we have asked the relevant questions), we have found much less enthusiasm for boosting per pupil expenditures and teacher salaries among those who are first told how much these items are actually costing the district. We also find that people seriously underestimate how much is currently spent and how much teachers are paid.

4) *People like their local schools more than ever before, but at the same time they judge a substantial share of the teaching force to be performing below a satisfactory level.* Consistent with this view, as of today a substantial share of the public would end teacher tenure and pay more-effective teachers higher salaries than less-effective ones. However, one cannot be sure that public support for those tactics would be as great once a specific policy to enact them were put into place.

5) *More than the public, teachers support higher salaries, embrace teacher tenure, oppose merit pay, and back the unions that represent many of them.* They are also more likely to oppose most forms of school choice. Although teacher support for Common Core tumbled in 2014 and 2015, in the past year it has stabilized, with nearly half the teaching force continuing to support Common Core. Surprisingly, teachers believe that 1 out of every 10 of their colleagues is performing at an unsatisfactory level.

6) *Members of the public do not favor the idea that expulsion and suspension rates in schools should necessarily be race neutral.* Despite the wide disparities in expulsions and suspensions across racial groups, most people oppose policies that would require schools to suspend black and Hispanic students at the same rate as other students.

7) *Both parents and the public as a whole remain supportive of testing and opposed to policies that would allow parents to withhold their children from state test-taking, but support for parental opt-out has gained ground among teachers.*

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