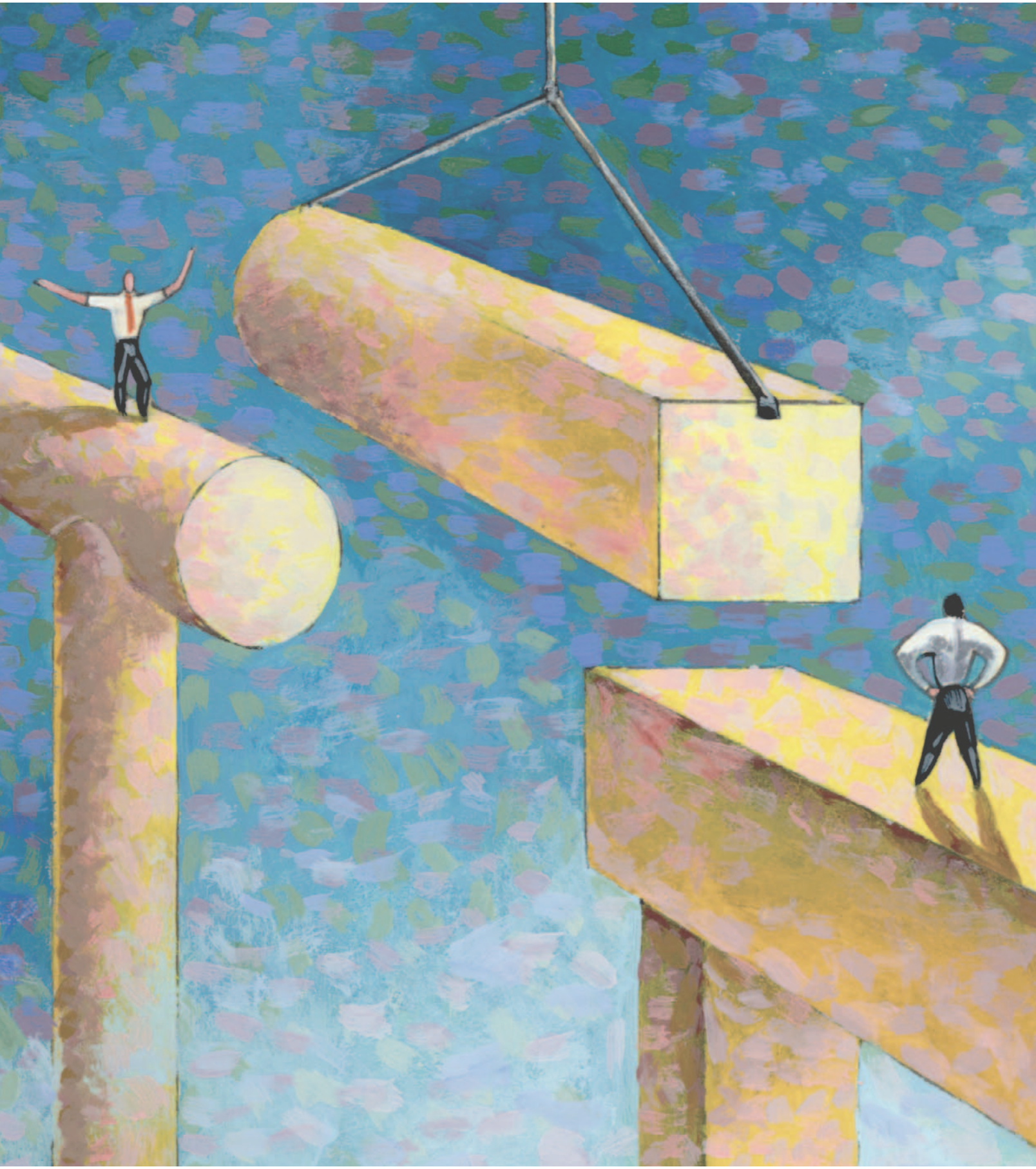


ILLUSTRATION / GETTY IMAGES

Meeting *of the* Minds

Democrats and Republicans in Washington, D.C., are more polarized today than they have been in nearly a century. And among the general public, party identification remains the single most powerful predictor of people's opinions about a wide range of policy issues. Given this environment, reaching consensus on almost any issue of consequence would appear difficult. And when it comes to education policy, which does a particularly good job of stirring people's passions, opportunities for advancing meaningful policy reform would appear entirely fleeting.

Against this backdrop, the results of the 2010 Education Next–Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) Survey are encouraging. With the exceptions of school spending and teacher tenure, the divisions between ordinary Democrats and Republicans on education policy matters are quite minor. To be sure, disagreements among Americans continue to linger. Indeed, with the exception of student and school accountability measures, Americans as a whole do not stand steadfastly behind any single reform proposal. Yet the most salient divisions appear to be within, not between, the political parties. And we find growing support for several strategies put forward in recent years by leaders of both political parties—most notably, online education and merit pay.

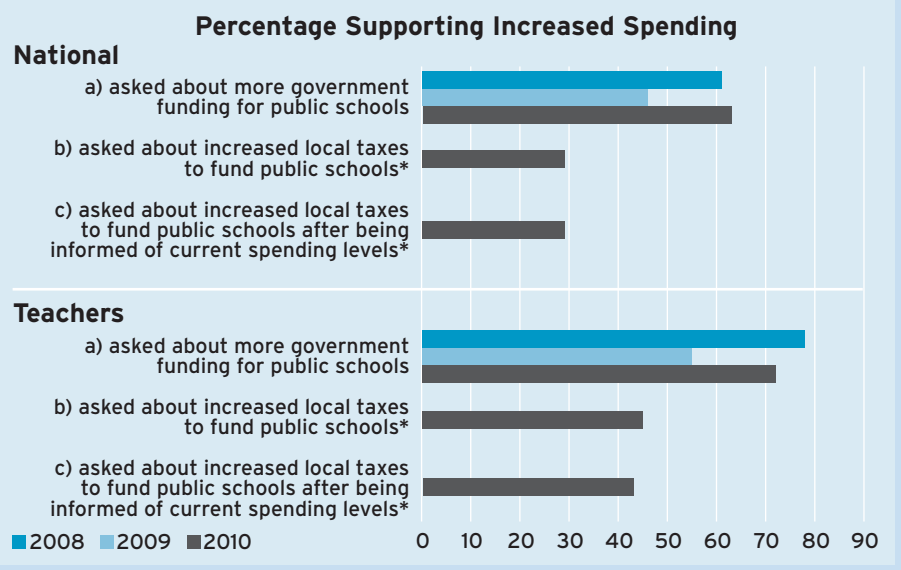
The 2010 EdNext-PEPG Survey shows that, on many reform issues, Democrats and Republicans hardly disagree

Nearly 2,800 respondents participated in the 2010 Education Next–PEPG Survey, which was administered in May and June of 2010 (see sidebar, page 31, for survey methodology). In addition to a nationally representative sample of American adults, the survey included representative samples of two populations of special interest: 1) public school teachers and 2) adults living in neighborhoods in which one or more charter schools are located. With a large number of respondents, we were able, in many cases, to pose differently

By WILLIAM G. HOWELL, PAUL E. PETERSON, and MARTIN R. WEST

Spend More but Don't Tax Me (Figure 1a)

Support for funding falls when public asked about a local tax increase or told about current spending levels.

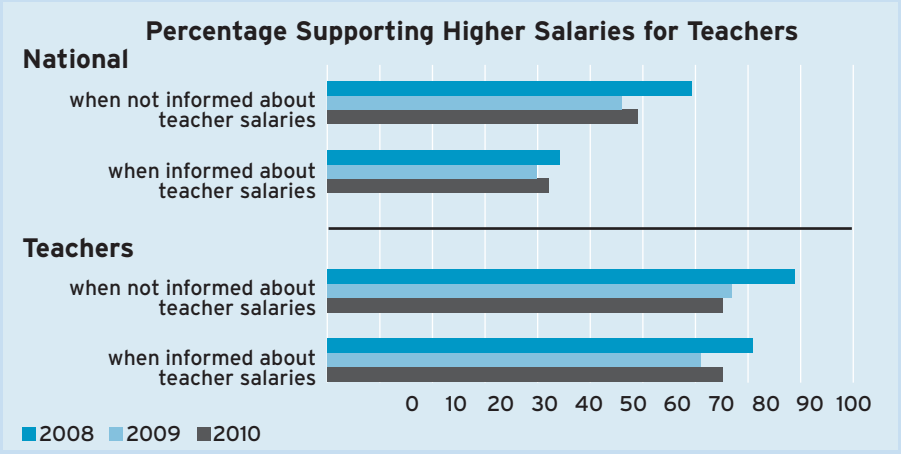


*This version of the question was not asked prior to 2010.
Note: Exact questions available at educationnext.org.

SOURCES: *Education Next*-PEPG Surveys 2008, 2009, 2010

Are Teacher Salaries Really That High? (Figure 1b)

Public support for raises shifts downward when told about average salary in their state.



Note: Exact questions available at educationnext.org.

SOURCES: *Education Next*-PEPG Surveys 2008, 2009, 2010

worded questions to two or more randomly chosen groups. In so doing, we were able to evaluate the extent to which expressed opinions change when a person is informed of certain facts, told about the president's position on an issue, or simply asked about a topic in a different way.

Grading the Nation's Schools

Americans today give the public schools as a whole poor marks. When asked to grade the nation's schools on the same A to F scale traditionally used to evaluate students, only 18 percent of survey respondents give them an "A" or a "B." This equals the percentage that awarded one of the top two grades in 2009, which had been the lowest level observed across the three years of our survey. More than one-quarter of respondents, meanwhile, continue to give the nation's schools a "D" or an "F." These sentiments are shared widely. Fewer than one-quarter of African Americans and Hispanics give the nation's schools an "A" or "B," as do just 18 percent of parents of school-aged children. Most telling, perhaps, only 28 percent of teachers give the nation's schools an "A" or a "B," while 55 percent give them a "C" and 17 percent a "D" or "F."

However, as in the past, the public's assessment of the local schools is far higher. No less than 65 percent of those surveyed are willing to give the school they identified as their local elementary school one of the two highest grades, and 55 percent are willing to give one of those grades to their local middle school. Only 6 percent assign their local elementary school a "D" or and "F," while 12 percent assign those low grades to their local middle school.

School Spending and Teacher Salaries

Though evaluations of schools remain low, the public appears as willing as ever to support more spending on schools—until, that is, it becomes clear that their own community would foot the bill. In 2010, amid mounting national, state, and local deficits, 63 percent of the public favor an increase in "government funding for public schools in your district," about the same level as in early 2008, just before the economic recession.

When it comes to school choice, charter schools and online education are "in," while private school vouchers are "out."

Public support for additional spending is more fragile than it appears, however. When asked whether "local taxes to fund public schools in your district should increase, decrease, or stay the same," only 29 percent of the public favor an increase (see Figure 1a). Such strong resistance to local taxation suggests that any increases in school spending are likely to come, if at all, from higher levels of government.

Whether or not the public supports higher teacher salaries also depends on how the question is worded. When the survey asked whether teacher salaries should be increased, 59 percent of respondents favor the idea in 2010 (see Figure 1b), well below the 69 percent support observed in 2008. Support for increased teacher salaries falls sharply when respondents are first told the average annual salary of teachers in their state. Supplied with that information, only 42 percent favor a salary increase.

It should come as no surprise that teachers are more supportive of additional school spending. Seventy-two percent favor more spending if no mention is made of taxes, and 45 percent continue to favor spending more even if that means a local tax increase. Teachers are also far more likely to think that their salaries should increase. In 2010, 75 percent support the idea, regardless of whether they are informed of average state salary levels.

Support for Reform

The public's willingness to consider alternatives to traditional public schools and traditional public-school practices has expanded in many, though not all, directions. The public remains friendly to school choice, but the kinds of choices it prefers are changing. Meanwhile, support for policies that base compensation on teacher performance has risen, but backing for other proposals to introduce standard business practices into the education sector has stayed about the same. The public's long-standing support for school and student accountability measures remains high, though it is expressed in slightly more qualified terms than in the past.

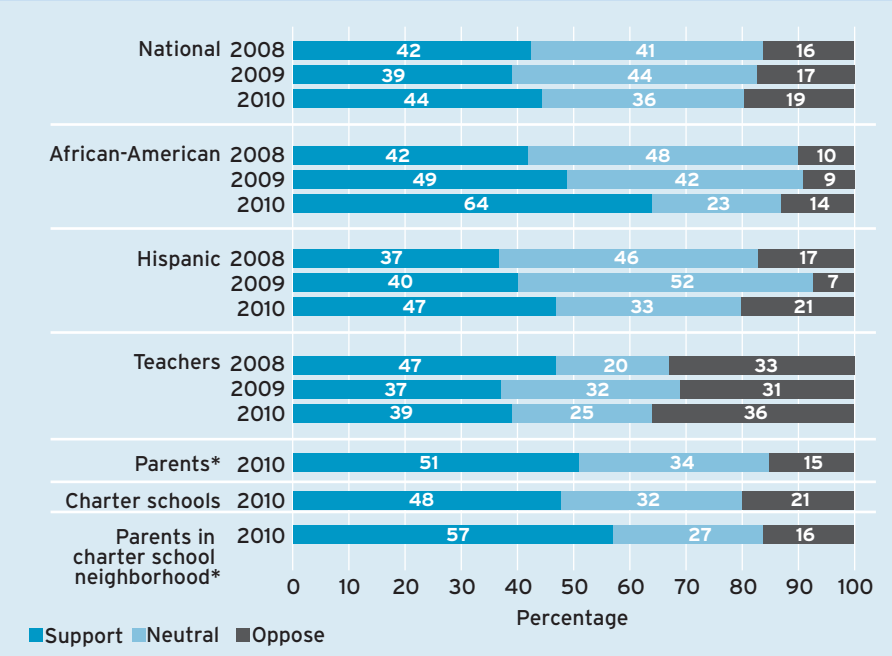
School Choice

When it comes to school choice, charter schools and online education are "in," while private school vouchers are "out." The charter option is especially popular among minorities and parents in neighborhoo ds where charter schools are already present.

Charters. Charter schools have emerged as the most widely discussed alternative to traditional public schools. Initiated in 1991 by a Minnesota law allowing private nonprofit entities to receive public funding to operate schools if authorized by a state agency, the idea has spread to more than 40 states, and some 1.5 million students today attend

Overall Charter Support Holds Steady (Figure 2)

Increasingly popular among minorities, but less popular among teachers.



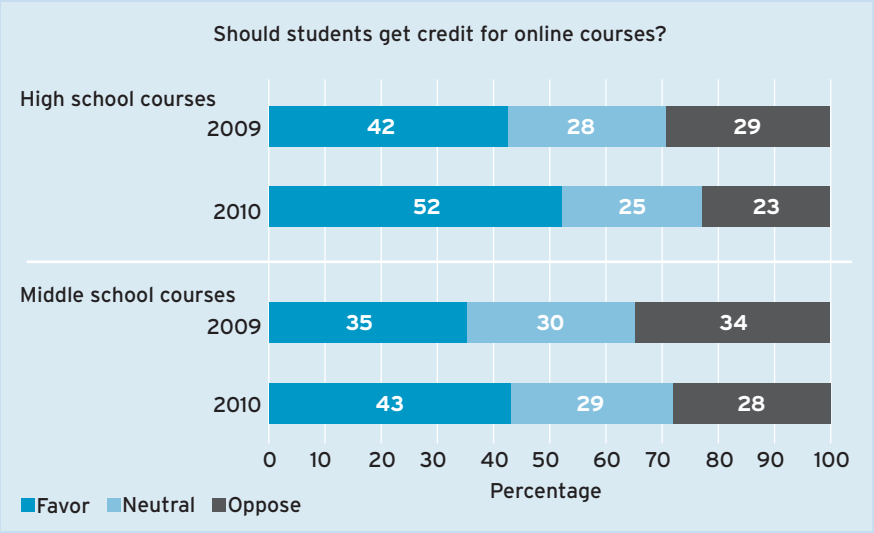
*** Those living in a charter school neighborhood and parents living in a charter school neighborhood were not separate categories of respondents prior to 2010.**

Note: Exact questions available at educationnext.org.

SOURCES: *Education Next*-PEPG Surveys 2008, 2009, 2010

Learning to Like the Internet (Figure 3)

A majority of the public think high school students should get credit for online courses.



Note: Exact questions available at educationnext.org.

SOURCES: *Education Next*-PEPG Surveys 2009, 2010

charter schools. Charters have been praised for opening the schoolhouse door to entrepreneurial, energetic teachers and leaders as well as for raising student achievement in high-need regions. But the practice of chartering has also been criticized for allowing low-quality schools to remain in operation and for siphoning resources away from district schools.

To see whether the presence of a charter school within a neighborhood is correlated with public opinion—either favorable or unfavorable—we surveyed a representative sample of residents living in zip codes in which at least one charter school is located. The presence of charter schools in the community has not gone unnoticed. Forty-eight percent of all adults—and 50 percent of parents of school-aged children—living in a neighborhood with at least one charter school were aware of that fact.

After describing a charter school in neutral language, the survey asked respondents if they favor or oppose "the formation of charter schools." The survey also gave respondents the option of staying neutral by saying they neither favor nor oppose the policy. Those holding the neutral position declined from 44 percent to 36 percent between 2009 and 2010, likely reflecting the heightened attention to charter schools in national debates over education reform (see Figure 2). Among African Americans and Hispanics, indications that opinion has begun to solidify were even stronger: The portion of African Americans holding the neutral position crashed from 48 percent to 23 percent between 2008 and 2010. For Hispanics, the drop was from 46 percent to 33 percent. Similarly, only 27 percent of the parents who live in charter neighborhoods take the neutral position.

Support for charter schools has remained reasonably steady over the last several years. Between 2008 and 2009, the portion of the public saying they favor charters fell from 42 percent to 39 percent, but that trend reversed in the past year, putting charter support at 44 percent in 2010. Opposition to charters now stands at 19 percent, giving supporters a better than two-to-one advantage over opponents.

Within minority communities, however, support for charters appears to be rising. Among African Americans the portion who support charters grew from 42 percent to 49 percent between 2008 and 2009 and leapt to 64 percent in 2010, with only 14 percent expressing opposition. Among Hispanics, levels of support grew from 37 to 47 percent across the three annual surveys.

In communities where at least one charter school is located, overall levels of support are only somewhat higher: 48 percent of the public favor the formation of charters, while 20 percent are opposed. But fully 57 percent of the parents in communities with charter schools favor them, compared to 51 percent of parents nationwide (a group that includes some parents living in communities with a charter school presence).

Fully 57 percent of the parents in communities with charter schools favor them, compared to 51 percent of parents nationwide.

Both proponents and critics have noted that charter schools are over-represented in communities with high concentrations

of minorities, yet this fact alone does not explain the higher levels of support in areas with a charter school. Among residents of communities with a charter school, 63 percent of white parents express support for the idea, as compared with 50 percent of white parents nationally. These numbers may be encouraging, then, for those who hope that the gradual spread of charters will strengthen support for this reform strategy. However, our data do not tell us whether the charter presence is causing opinion to change or whether charters took root in these areas because of underlying public support for charter schools. What we can say with confidence is that the presence of charters—and the intense local debates it often generates—has not been sufficient to undermine popular support for this policy option.

Bucking all of these trends, teacher opposition to charters has intensified. Support for charters among public school teachers fell from 47 percent to 39 percent between 2008 and 2010, while opposition grew slightly from 33 percent to 36 percent. Once leaning toward charters, teacher opinion is now almost evenly divided between support and opposition.

Although overall public support for charters shows signs of solidifying, key facts about charters remain unknown. Only 18 percent of the public know that charters cannot hold religious services, 19 percent that they cannot charge tuition, 15 percent that students must be admitted by lottery (if the school is oversubscribed), and just 12 percent that, typically, charters receive less government funding per pupil than traditional public schools. In each instance, the remaining portions either answer the question incorrectly or, more often, confess that they simply don't know.

In several respects, parents in communities with a charter presence are only marginally more knowledgeable than the public at large. However, 30 percent of parents are aware that charters cannot charge tuition, and 28 percent realize charters must use lotteries if oversubscribed. In other words, parents with a charter nearby appear better informed about the mechanics of enrolling a child but no more informed than the broader public about other regulations on charter practices.

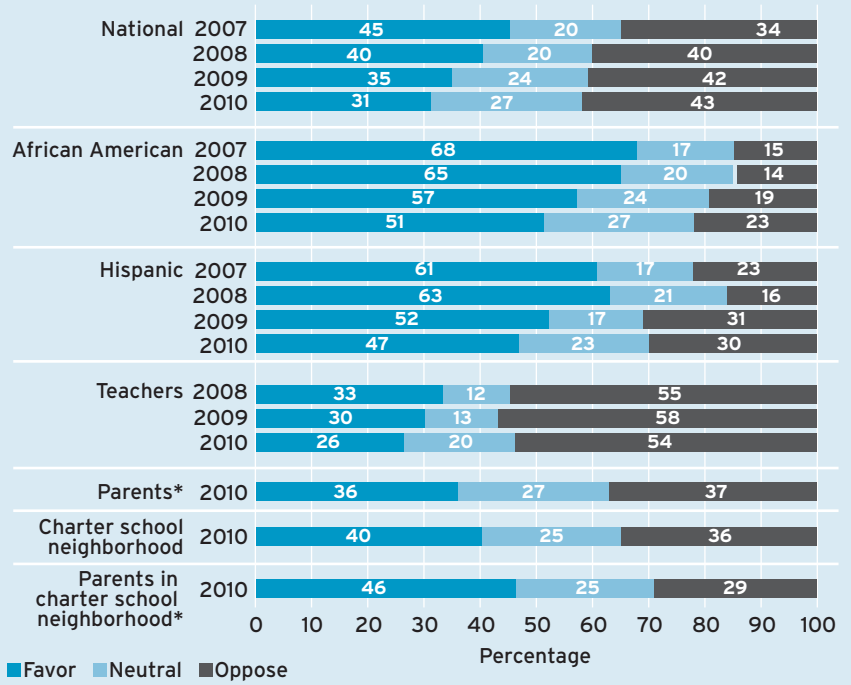
Virtual education. Online learning is rapidly penetrating the higher education system, and, according to some estimates, more than 1 million high school and middle school students are also taking courses online. As these changes take place, online learning is growing more acceptable to the public at large. In 2009, 42 percent of the public said they thought high school students should receive credit for state-approved courses taken over the Internet. Within one year, that number jumped to 52 percent. Opposition meanwhile fell from 29 percent to 23 percent. One-quarter of the public express indifference (see Figure 3).

Support for online coursework by middle schoolers, though not as great as for high schoolers, also increased from 35 percent to 43 percent between 2009 and 2010. Still, the practice of online learning remains nascent. Less than one-tenth of those interviewed said they personally know any high school or middle school student who has taken a course online.

School vouchers. Compared to charter schools and online learning, private school vouchers have long been a more controversial feature of the school politics landscape. In recent years, voucher supporters have suffered political defeat at least as often as they have enjoyed success. A recent federal study of the much-watched voucher program in Washington, D.C.,

Voucher Vicissitudes (Figure 4)

Public support for school vouchers is sliding downhill.



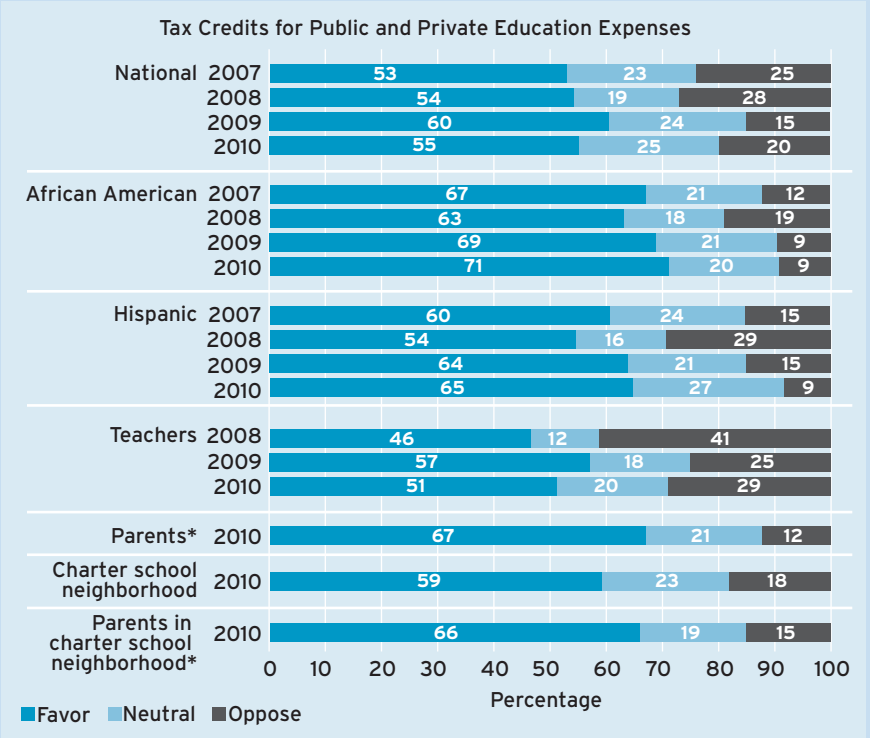
*** Teachers were not a separate category of respondents prior to 2008; those living in a charter school neighborhood and parents living in a charter school neighborhood were not separate categories of respondents prior to 2010.**

Note: Exact question available at educationnext.org.

SOURCES: *Education Next*-PEPG Surveys 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010

Credit-Worthy (Figure 5)

Tax credits for public and private schools remain popular.



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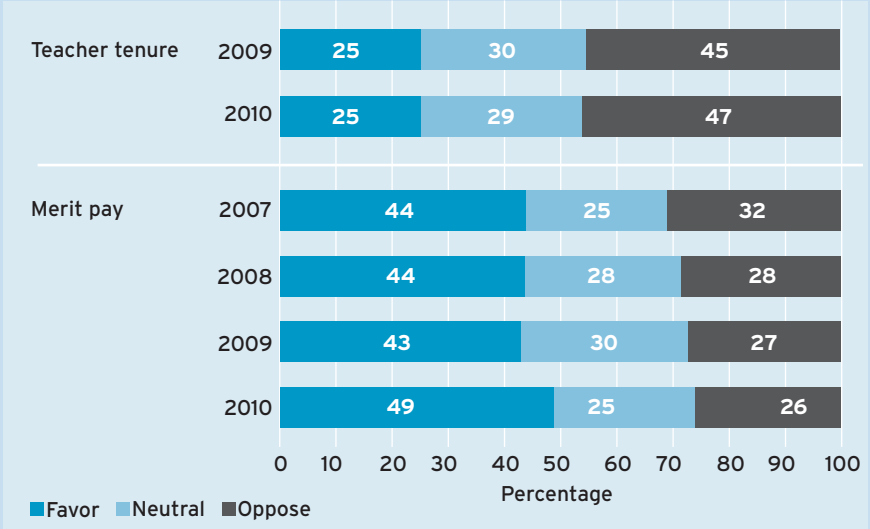
Note: Exact question available at educationnext.org.

SOURCES: *Education Next*-PEPG Surveys 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010

No Exceptions for Teachers (Figure 6)

The public supports merit pay and opposes practices that guarantee teachers tenure.



Note: Exact questions available at educationnext.org.

SOURCES: *Education Next*-PEPG Surveys 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010

for example, showed that using a voucher boosted a student's chances of graduating from high school. That positive development for voucher supporters, however, was offset by congressional action, supported by President Barack Obama, that shut down the program.

So even as support for charters and online learning has grown, the popularity of vouchers has slipped. When in 2007 we asked the public about a program that would "use government funds to help pay the tuition of low-income students…to attend private schools," 45 percent favored the idea, but that number has steadily fallen in the three subsequent years. In 2010, only 31 percent express approval. Meanwhile, opposition has grown from 34 percent to 43 percent (see Figure 4).

Support for vouchers is greater within the African American and Hispanic communities, but declines are evident there as well. Sixty-eight percent of African Americans and 61 percent of Hispanics supported vouchers in 2007, but only 51 percent and 47 percent of the two groups, respectively, take a similar position in 2010.

Interestingly, support for vouchers is higher in communities where charter schools are located. Forty-six percent of the parents in these neighborhoods support vouchers, as do 40 percent of all residents. Again, however, our data do not tell us whether the charter presence has caused opinion to change or whether charters have simply located in areas that are more hospitable to school choice.

Tax credits. A number of states—Arizona, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island, for example—provide tax credits for low-income families who send their children to private schools or to those who give to charities established for such purposes. Support for tax credits is much higher than for vouchers, especially if the question makes clear that credits may be used for school expenses at both public and private schools. Still, support for this policy has also lost ground in the past three years. In 2008, 64 percent of the public favored tax credits, whereas only

55 percent do so in 2010. Opposition has grown from 15 percent to 20 percent (see Figure 5).

The idea remains extremely popular among African Americans, however, with levels of support hovering around 70 percent during the last three years. Among Hispanics, support fell from 75 percent to 65 percent between 2008 and 2010.

Tax credits for donors to scholarship programs that help low-income students attend private schools garner twice as much support as opposition. Half the public support the idea, while only 22 percent oppose it. Support for this form of school choice is again greater in neighborhoods where charters are located, both among parents and the general public. And in contrast to other policies that would expand access to private schools, support for this idea increased modestly in the past year.

Teacher Policy and Teachers Unions

Public discussions of the best way to recruit, evaluate, and compensate teachers have proliferated of late, largely due to research demonstrating the importance of teacher quality for student achievement. But with one exception, public opinion on these issues has remained relatively stable.

Merit pay. That exception, paying teachers according to their classroom performance, received support from the Obama administration when it invited states to include this innovation in their proposals to obtain federal funds from its signature education reform initiative, Race to the Top.

To assess public support for this policy, commonly known as merit pay, the survey asked respondents in 2009 whether they favored "basing a teacher's salary, in part, on students' academic progress on state tests." Only 27 percent opposed the idea, while 43 percent welcomed it. In 2010, support increased to 49 percent (see Figure 6), although one-quarter of the population continue to oppose the idea.

Teacher tenure. In February 2010, the superintendent of schools in Central Falls, Rhode Island, announced the dismissal of all teachers at her district's high school on the grounds that the school was persistently underperforming. To the surprise of many, her actions received presidential approval. "If a school continues to fail its students year after year, if it doesn't show signs of improvement, then there's got to be a sense of accountability," President Obama announced. "And that's what happened in Rhode Island." Eventually, the board and local teachers union reached a compromise, and media attention shifted to other topics.

Obama's comments reflected the balance of opinion in the public at large. Opponents of the practice of offering tenure to public school teachers outnumber its supporters in 2010 by a margin of nearly two to one. Forty-seven percent of the public oppose teacher tenure, while only 25 percent are in favor (see Figure 6). Not surprisingly, the distribution of teacher opinion is almost exactly the opposite. The events in Rhode Island apparently were too isolated to alter national opinion on tenure policy, as responses remain essentially the same in 2010 as they had been one year earlier.

Teachers unions. Nor did public opinion concerning teachers unions change significantly, despite rising union opposition to many of the Obama administration's education reform initiatives. Those who think unions have a "negative effect" on their local schools ticked upward from 31 percent to 33 percent between 2009 and 2010, while those who think unions have a "positive effect" remained unchanged at 28 percent. In both years, a plurality of roughly 40 percent took no position on the question.

Student and School Accountability

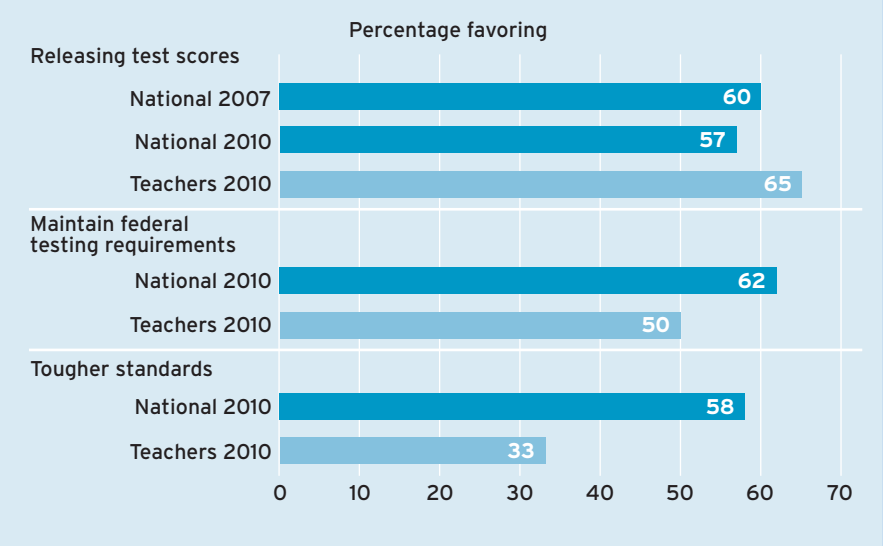
Few ideas are more popular than holding students accountable for their performance. In 2007, 85 percent of those interviewed said they thought students should be required to "pass an examination" in order to graduate from high school, as they are required to do "in some states." In 2010, 76 percent of the public continue to express such sentiments. In both years, opposition hovered around 10 percent of the total. Support is high even among teachers, of whom 63 percent think students should be required to pass an exam to receive their degree.

A clear plurality, even a majority, of the American public support a wide range of policy innovations ranging from charter schools and tax credits to tougher standards, accountability measures, and merit pay for teachers.

Hardly less popular is the more stringent rule that students must pass a test before moving on to the next grade, as is currently required for 3rd graders in both Florida and New York City. Eighty-one percent supported that idea in 2007 and nearly the same percentage—79 percent—favor it in 2010. Again, in both years, opposition amounted to no more than 9 percent of the total. Teachers are nearly as likely to favor the idea, perhaps because it would help to ensure that their students are prepared for the material they are asked to impart.

The Wonderful World of Accountability (Figure 7)

Everyone (except, at times, teachers) wants tough testing standards and school accountability.



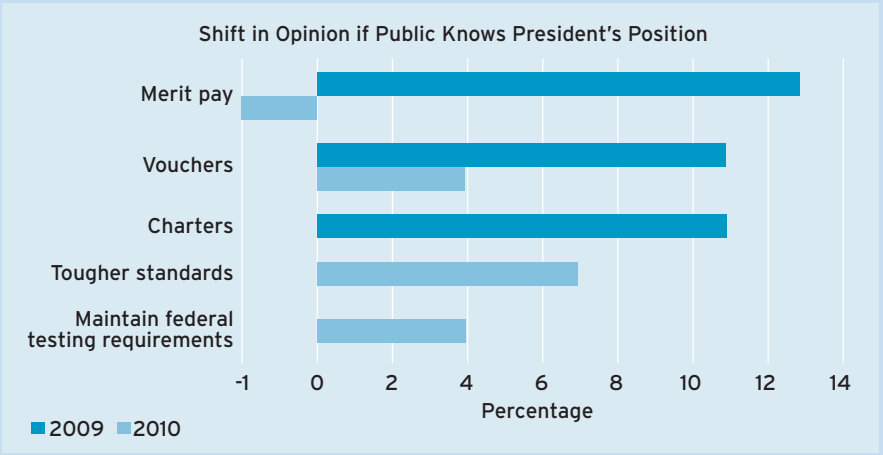
*** Teachers were not a separate category of respondents prior to 2008.**

Note: Exact questions available at educationnext.org.

SOURCES: *Education Next*-PEPG Surveys 2007, 2010

Presidential Power: Not Quite What It Used to Be (Figure 8)

The president persuades a smaller percentage in 2010 than in 2009.



Notes: No bar shown if experiment not conducted in given year. Exact questions available at educationnext.org.

SOURCES: *Education Next*-PEPG Surveys, 2009, 2010

It is surprising that an idea that is so popular does not find its way into the national political agenda. To be sure, there are some signs that the public's appetite for student accountability measures may have waned somewhat. Overall levels of support have declined of late, and the percentage of Americans who profess to "strongly support" either of the proposals discussed above has dropped by even larger margins. More likely, though, elite politics are responsible for the exclusion of this policy reform from public debate. Teachers unions, which are core constituents of the Democratic Party, oppose these measures. And the Republican Party, with its historical support for local control, has thus far proved unwilling to step into the fray.

The nationwide practice of releasing to the public the average test scores for every school is slightly less popular than holding students accountable. The survey posed the question, "Do you support or oppose making available to the general public the average test scores of students at each public school?" In 2007, 60 percent voiced support, and 57 percent favor the practice in 2010. Opposition stood at 20 percent in both years. But only 45 percent of the teachers favor making this information available to the public. Clearly, school transparency is more popular with the public than with those who work inside the schools (see Figure 7).

Given the general level of support for student and school accountability, it is to be expected that the public supports those provisions of No Child Left Behind that require regular testing in grades 3 through 8 and once more in high school. When the survey asked whether respondents favor maintaining current federal testing requirements, 62 percent of the public say yes, though only 50 percent of teachers agree (see Figure 7). If the respondent is informed that President Obama proposed that these provisions be continued, support increases slightly to 66 percent of those surveyed (see Figure 8). If the president's endorsement seems to have only slight general effect, it helps solidify support among a key constituency, as support among teachers moves decisively upward to 59 percent.

To further explore Obama's capacity to shape public opinion, the survey asked half the respondents whether they favor "toughening" state standards used to evaluate student performance. Even with no mention of the president's views, the idea appears to be popular, as 58 percent say they support the idea and only 15 percent oppose it. The support level is still higher among the half of the sample informed of Obama's support for the proposal. Among this group, 65 percent support more rigorous standards.

There is less partisan polarization between the parties than might be expected on student and school accountability, charter schools, and other school reform issues.

Bipartisan Agenda?

A clear plurality, even a majority, of the American public support a wide range of policy innovations ranging from charter schools and tax credits to tougher standards, accountability measures, and merit pay for teachers. But pluralities and bare majorities are often not enough to alter public policy in a country where power is divided between two highly competitive and increasingly polarized political parties. If Republicans and Democrats disagree strongly on the options for school reform, changes are unlikely—despite clear signs that the public is concerned about the quality of public education.

To examine the extent to which self-identified Democrats and Republicans differ on education issues, we calculated the difference between the average position on key issues held by Democratic respondents and the position held by Republican respondents. On each issue, individual responses were placed on a 1–5 scale, ranging from "strongly oppose" (1) to "strongly support" (5). Figure 9 shows the extent to which Democrats, on average, differ from Republicans on a given issue. The longer the bar, the more polarized the party supporters. If the bar falls to the left side of zero, Democrats support the policy more than Republicans; if the bar falls to the right, Republicans support the policy more than Democrats.

Overall, there appears to be far less polarization between the parties than might be expected. On questions concerning their overall assessment of the nation's schools, student and school accountability, and even the creation of charter schools, the distance between the parties amounted to less than 0.2 points on the 5-point scale. In the case of accountability measures, the combination of strong overall support and minimal partisan conflict suggests that such policies will continue to be central to the nation's education reform agenda. In the case of charter schools, for which overall support is more mixed, it appears that the important divisions in public opinion are within rather than between the nation's major political parties.

The divergence between the parties is slightly larger on school vouchers and tax credits for education expenses, at 0.22 and 0.25, respectively. But in contrast to the patterns observed among elected officials, ordinary Democrats are somewhat more supportive than Republicans of these policies, in part due to the strong support for private school choice within the heavily Democratic minority community. Thirty-five percent of Democrats express support for vouchers, compared to 30 percent of Republicans. And Democrats are more likely than Republicans to support tax credits by a 60 percent to 53 percent margin.

The key exceptions to the general story of cross-party agreement involve school spending, teacher tenure, and the influence of teachers unions. Democrats are more supportive than Republicans of increasing teacher salaries and especially overall school spending, for which the difference in average positions is larger than 0.5 on the 5-point scale. Fully 70 percent of Democrats support increased spending if no mention is made of taxes, compared to only 40 percent of Republicans. The differences on teacher tenure policy are even larger, as 62 percent of Republicans but only 34 percent of Democrats altogether oppose the practice. Most strikingly, Democrats have a far more sanguine view of the influence of teachers unions on their community's schools: 39 percent consider them to have a positive effect, while only 19 percent see their effect as negative. Among Republicans, only 17 percent believe that teachers unions have a positive effect, and 50 percent believe they have a negative effect.

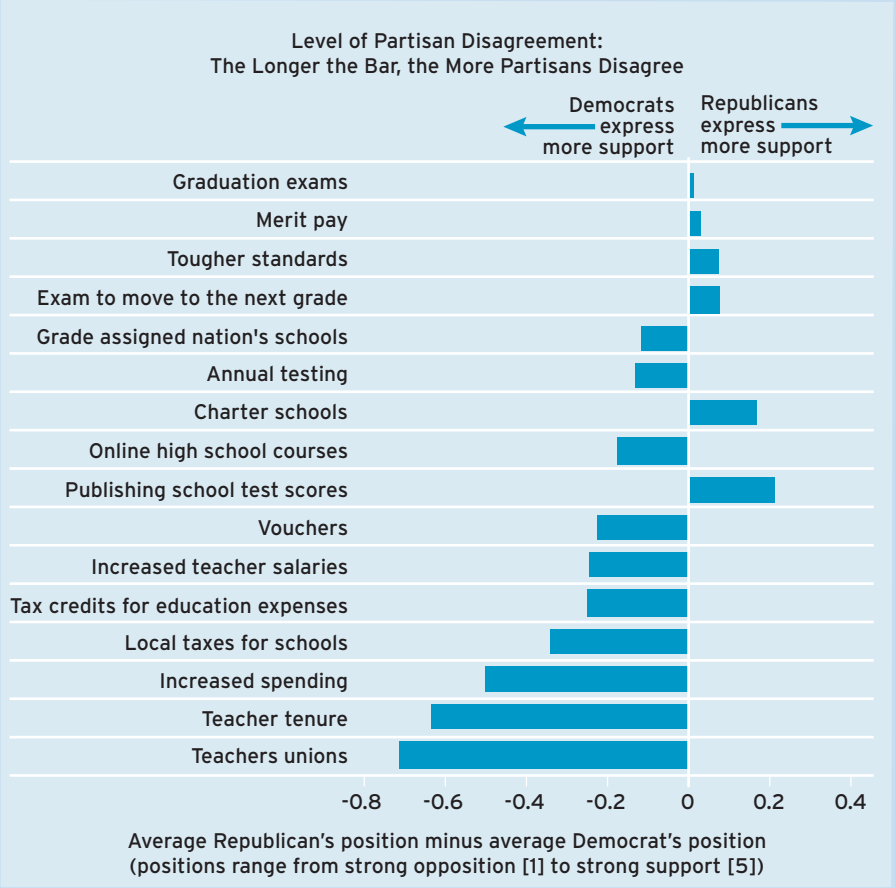
President as Opinion Maker

Our data do not allow us to identify all the factors that are reshaping public opinion. But inasmuch as the president of the United States has the largest "bully pulpit" and is in the best position to set the public agenda, it is reasonable to suppose that the Obama administration has contributed to some of the changes in opinion reported above.

At the same time, the president's persuasiveness is likely to depend on his popularity with the general public. To investigate this possibility, we asked parallel sets of questions in

On Education Issues, Are the Political Parties Polarized? (Figure 9)

Yes and No: On many matters—standards, accountability, charters, tax credits, and overall evaluation of nation's schools—Democrats and Republicans think pretty much alike, but when it comes to teacher policy and school spending, differences emerge.



Notes: The bars represent the difference between the average position on each policy held by those identifying with the Democratic Party and by those identifying with the Republican Party on a five-point scale, ranging from strongly oppose to strongly support. The chart shows, for example, that Democrats are better than 0.6 points higher on the five-point scale in their support for teacher tenure than are Republicans.

SOURCES: Authors' calculations

March 2009, when President Obama was at the peak of his popularity, and in May 2010, when his approval ratings had fallen below 50 percent. On both occasions, one-half of respondents were asked their opinion on several issues only after being told the president's position, while the other randomly chosen half were asked the question outright.

In early 2009, exposure to the president's views had the effect of shifting public opinion in the direction of the president's by 13 percentage points on merit pay and 11 percentage points on charters and vouchers (see Figure 8). Sizable increases were observed for both Democrats and Republicans. But one year later, Obama's influence foundered. In the summer of 2010, public support for merit pay actually decreased by 1 percentage point when respondents were told that the president favored the idea. Among Democrats, knowing the president's position increased support by 8 percentage points, enough to bring the share in favor of merit pay to 53 percent. Among Republicans, however, being told of the president's position reduced support for merit pay by 12 percentage points, from 55 to 43 percent. Public opinion on maintaining federal testing requirements shifted in the president's direction by only 4 percentage points when respondents were told of his position, with support falling by 1 percentage point among Republicans and increasing by 6 percentage points among Democrats. Finally, when respondents were told that the president opposed vouchers, public support fell by only 5 percentage points—less than half the decline observed on the same issue in 2009 (see Figure 8).

These experimental data suggest that by 2010 President Obama wielded few of the persuasive powers he brandished during the honeymoon months of his presidency. It is possible, though, that his influence in 2009 was put to good use. Between 2009 and 2010, public opinion on merit pay, charter schools, and vouchers all shifted closer to the president's position. The public became 6 percentage points more supportive of merit pay, 5 percentage points more supportive of charter schools, and 4 points less favorable to vouchers. Of course, these data do not establish that presidential appeals are responsible for these changes in public opinion. The president, after all, is hardly the only opinion maker in society. But if opinion reflects the cross-currents of conversations taking place in a society, then the holder of the nation's highest office may

By 2010 President Obama wielded few of the persuasive powers he brandished during the honeymoon months of his presidency.

be able to alter opinion on the issues of the day, at least at those moments when presidential popularity is high.

Conclusions

Democrats and Republicans are at each other's throats in the nation's capital. On cable news and talk radio, the Left rants about the Right, and vice versa. More than any time in recent memory, American politics is defined by hectoring, sniping, and bullying. For those fond of democratic deliberation and consensus building, these are unhappy times.

The results of the 2010 Education Next–PEPG Survey, however, suggest that the public does not necessarily subscribe to all the positions taken by the most vocal elements in our society. Indeed, our results suggest the possibility of advancing meaningful policy reform. The American public shows growing support for online learning and merit pay for teachers and continued support for accountability, standards, testing, and charter schools—education innovations that have been endorsed by leaders in both major parties. No less important is the fact that opinion on many key education issues does not polarize the public along partisan lines. Moreover, we find suggestive evidence that while the current president's persuasive powers may have waned, they appear to have had an impact.

Clearly, we mustn't get carried away. With the exception of student accountability measures, no single policy reform garners the support of huge swaths of the American public. But taken as a whole, the results from this year's Education Next–PEPG survey are cause for some optimism among school reformers. With appropriate leadership, a bipartisan majority may yet rally in support of a significant school reform package.

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Survey Methods

The 2010 *Education Next*–PEPG Survey of Public Opinion was conducted by the polling firm Knowledge Networks (KN) between May 11 and June 8, 2010. KN maintains a nationally representative panel of adults, obtained via list-assisted random digit–dialing sampling techniques, who agree to participate in a limited number of online surveys. Detailed information about the maintenance of the KN panel, the protocols used to administer surveys, and the comparability of online and telephone surveys is available online at www.knowledgenetworks.com/quality/.

The main findings from the *Education Next*–PEPG survey reported in this essay are based on a nationally representative stratified sample of 1,184 adults (age 18 years and older) and oversamples of 684 public school teachers and 908 residents of zip codes in which a charter school was located during the 2009–10 school year. The total sample of 2,776 adults consists of 2,038 non-Hispanic whites, 280 non-Hispanic blacks, 263 Hispanics, and 195 individuals identifying with another or multiple racial or ethnic groups.

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 subgroups. With 2,776 total respondents, the margin of error for responses given by the full sample in the *Education Next*–PEPG survey is 1.86 percentage points for questions on which opinion is evenly split.

On many items, we conducted survey experiments to examine the effect of variations in the way questions are posed. The figures and online tables present separately the results for the different experimental conditions.

Percentages reported in the figures and online tables do not always add precisely to 100 as a result of rounding to the nearest percentage point.