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EDUCATION

What Do Americans Really Think About Education Policy?

Two recent polls conflict in their findings on what adults think about standardized testing, the opt-out movement, and the Common Core.



Stefanie Loos / Reuters

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Getting a read on the American public's views on education is no easy task, made more complicated by just how much local schools vary. In a country with more than 13,000 school districts that enroll nearly 50 million students, a range of experiences and perspectives are to be expected.

According to two polls released this month by different organizations, U.S. adults maintain divergent views on some of the most controversial topics in public education today. For both policymakers and political candidates, the poll results at times say conflicting things, even if the questions were worded differently.

- **Common Core:** In the *Education Next* public opinion poll, 49 percent of U.S. adults said they support the Common Core State Standards; in the other poll, conducted by PDK/Gallup, 24 percent of adults share that view, while more than half said they oppose the common standards for English language arts and mathematics adopted by most states.
- **Testing:** 59 percent of adults, and 52 percent of parents, opposed allowing parents to prevent their children from taking standardized tests, the *Education Next* poll finds. It said 25 percent of U.S. adults support the ability to opt out. The PDK/Gallup poll shows that 44 percent of U.S. adults—and 40 percent of parents—believe that parents should be permitted to opt their students out of standardized tests. And parents surveyed by PDK/Gallup were more likely to support the practice than in the *Education Next* poll by a margin of 47 to 32 percent.
- **Charter Schools:** The polls captured different levels of support for charter schools among U.S. adults. Charters, which are publicly funded but are typically run by private nonprofit or for-profit groups, have the support of 64 percent of adults, according to PDK/Gallup. The *Education Next* poll found that 47 percent of adults favor the creation of charter schools.

It's important to remember that polls are like “dipping a thermometer into a giant melting pot of American society,” says Jonathan Supovitz, the co-director of the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania. “You're bound to get different readings in different places.”

Given that caveat, how accurate or useful is polling data? Education polls often ask unprepared people to make “finely nuanced distinctions” without the requisite background, said Andrew Rotherham, the co-founder and a partner at Bellwether Education Partners, a national nonprofit in Washington, in an interview last year. “You get a result, but you also get a lot of noise.”

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The Common Core’s popularity has waned as more Americans have become familiar with the standards, which are opposed by an animated contingent of liberal and conservative voters, though for different reasons. Liberal critics charge the standards were written without sufficient input from parents and teachers, while conservatives see the standards as a federal intrusion on states’ rights. (The U.S. Department of Education created incentives for states to adopt the standards, but did not require their adoption.)

Two years ago, 65 percent of Americans in an *Education Next* poll supported the standards. That year a PDK/Gallup poll noted that nearly two-thirds of U.S. adults have never heard of the Common Core. Fast-forward to this month and nearly every adult is in some way familiar with the standards, PDK/Gallup says, and support for the standards is considerably lower.

For the Common Core, the “proof will be in the pudding,” said Paul Peterson, a Harvard professor who oversaw the *Education Next* poll. “If the standards do end up being fully implemented and students start learning more, then the public opinion might change.”

When the PDK/Gallup questions on standards are put next to the *Education Next* findings on the Common Core, the responses are not out of alignment, Peterson said: People are generally in favor of setting higher expectations for

students across states but they also want local teachers to have leeway in how those goals are met. (In an essay analyzing the two polls, he and his colleague Martin R. West [wrote that the](#) “two surveys are complementary, because they ask about different topics.”)

Indeed, in a call with reporters, Joshua Starr, the former superintendent of Montgomery County Public Schools in suburban Maryland and the newly named chief executive officer of PDK, made points similar to Peterson’s:

The divide between the percentage of parents who believe those standards should be higher and then the percentage of parents who don’t support the Common Core, that’s very interesting to me in signaling the potential for a lack of understanding of what the Common Core is.

The furor over allowing parents to pull their students from taking state tests is a newer phenomenon, but can affect the legitimacy and even funding of high-stakes tests. With too many students foregoing taking the assessments, the results may be limited in what they can tell the public about how much students know in math and reading. And according to the federal No Child Left Behind law, states technically risk losing some federal funding if less than 95 percent of students take the high-stakes exams.

In New York, some 20 percent of students opted out of the recently-issued assessments, which are said to measure students with more vigor now that they’re more closely aligned with the Common Core standards. New York education officials have [indicated](#) that districts won’t face financial consequences for dipping below that 95 percent threshold. Washington state also posted testing-boycott numbers that saw some of its districts dip below

95 percent participation among eligible students. Among Seattle's 11th-grade students, [nearly half boycotted the exams](#).

In the coming weeks, more states are slated to release the scores for their students who took the high-stakes tests, many of which were aligned with the Common Core standards for the first time. With campaign season heating up, public polls that try to get a pulse on American attitudes toward education are likely to play into the policy prescriptions of candidates who are critical of the Common Core and supportive of hot-button issues like charter schools.

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But Americans have long been of two minds about the quality of the nation's schools—with most giving their local schools high marks but education in the United States far lower levels of approval on the whole. As Matt Chingos, an education scholar, [told the *Los Angeles Times*](#) last week, “If people like their local schools, regardless of what they think about schools nationally, they’re not going to be very likely to vote based on that issue.” Chingos also told the paper that voters are “not going to vote for someone just because that candidate is going to fix a problem with someone else’s schools.” The news outlet *EdSource* compared the PDK/Gallup poll to those that focused just on California views, [showing another gulf in sentiment](#) depending on the polling group.

And both national polls released this month show that adults have mixed feelings—and perceptions—concerning the federal government’s role in the financial affairs of local schools, even though it provides just about one-tenth of U.S. public K-12 education funding. The *Education Next* poll found that on

average adults believe 32 percent of public-school funding is sourced from federal coffers. The poll also asked adults how much money the federal government should contribute to public education. The respondents gave an average answer of 37 percent—nearly quadruple what the government provides now. The PDK/Gallup poll found that 46 percent of adults believe the lion’s share of education funding should come from states, while 23 percent said they want the federal government to kick in the most dollars.*

The *Education Next* survey polled nearly 4,100 adults, and has a margin of error of 2 percent; the PDK/Gallup poll asked 1,000 adults by phone and 3,500 adults online. PDK/Gallup’s phone survey has an error margin of 4.79 percent while the online version’s was 3.02 percent.

** This article previously stated that the PDK/Gallup poll found that adults believe 23 percent of public-school funding comes from the federal government. We regret the error.*

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