

2017

PDKPoll

of the public's attitudes toward the public schools

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Academic achievement isn't the only mission

Americans overwhelmingly support investments in career preparation but give a thumbs-down to vouchers and standardized testing.

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The three R's alone don't cut it anymore: Americans overwhelmingly want schools to do more than educate students in academic subjects. According to the 2017 PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools, they also want schools to help position students for their working lives after school. That means both direct career preparation and efforts to develop students' interpersonal skills.

When judging school quality, the public gives much more weight to students' job preparation and interpersonal development than to their standardized test scores, the poll shows. That said, though, Americans do still value traditional academic preparation, especially opportunities for advanced academic studies.

As in past years, the 2017 poll shows little public support for using public money to send children to private schools. The more Americans know about how voucher programs work, the less likely they are to support them or to say they'd participate in them.

These and other results suggest that some of the most prominent ideas that dominate current policy debates — from supporting vouchers to doubling down on high-stakes tests to cutting federal education funding — are out of step with parents' main concern: They want their children prepared for life after they complete high school.

The PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools is the most trusted source of public opinion data about K-12 education because of its rigor, its depth, and its commitment to capturing all voices and viewpoints. This year, as always, PDK has taken great care to frame poll questions as objectively as possible and to share the full and unvarnished results. Rather than offering a partial or restricted view of the data, we are committed to allowing the public to speak for itself.

The 2017 PDK survey is based on a random, representative, 50-state sample of 1,588 adults interviewed by cell or landline telephone, in English or Spanish, in May 2017. For the first time, this year's study also includes a pair of statewide samples — focusing on Georgia and New York — that we cover in separate reports. Langer Research Associates of New York, N.Y., produced this year's poll.

Key points

Chapters

[Preparing students for life after high school](#)

[Using public money to support private schools](#)

[Valuing diversity in public schools](#)

[Wrapping support around children who need it most](#)

[Measuring school quality](#)

[Grading the public schools](#)

[Expecting children to attend college](#)

[State polls](#)

Preparing students for life after high school

The strong emphasis on job preparation is consistent with and expands upon the findings from PDK's 2016 survey, in which fewer than half of respondents said academic preparation should be the main goal of a public school education. (The rest were divided between preparation for work or for citizenship as the top priority.)

This year's survey sharpens the point:

- A vast 82% of Americans support job or career skills classes even if that means students might spend less time in academic classes.
- 86% say schools in their community should offer certificate or licensing programs that qualify students for employment in a given field.
- Eight in 10 see technology and engineering classes as an extremely important or very important element of school quality.
- 82% also say that it is highly important for schools to help students develop interpersonal skills, such as being cooperative, respectful of others, and persistent at solving problems.

These interests complement rather than supplant an interest in academics: 76% of respondents see advanced academic classes as highly important indicators of school quality. Notably, nearly as many say it's also extremely or very important that schools offer extracurricular activities (70%) and art and music classes (71%).

The public offers little support for standardized testing in contrast to the deep interest in testing by policy makers over the last two decades. Less than half of adults (42%) say performance on standardized tests is a highly important indicator of school quality – that includes just 13% who call test scores extremely important. Far more point to developing students' interpersonal skills (39%) and offering technology and engineering instruction (37%) as extremely important.

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[Using public money to support private schools](#)

Just as the policy focus on standardized tests seems out of step with the American majority so, too, does the emphasis on vouchers. More Americans continue to oppose rather than favor using public funds to send students to private school (52% to 39%). And opposition rises – to 61% - when the issue is described in more detail.

As we have 20 times previously, we asked Americans whether they supported using vouchers to attend private schools. This year, we also asked whether vouchers could be used to attend religious or private schools. When religious schools are mentioned, opposition to vouchers rises sharply among Americans who have no religious affiliation or profess a non-Christian religion.

Other key findings:

- Traditional public schools don't command vast loyalty. If cost and location were not issues, just one-third of parents say they'd pick a

traditional public school over a private school (31%), public charter school (17%), or a religious school (14%).

- Only slightly more than half of public school parents (54%) say they'd stick with a public school if they were offered public funds to send their child to a private or religious school. (But that assumes full tuition coverage.)
- If a voucher covered just half of private or religious school tuition, the number of parents who say they'd stick with a public school swells to 72%.
- Just 21% agree that vouchers erode the quality of public schools. Opposition to vouchers seems based on views about the appropriate use of public funds.

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Valuing diversity in public schools

Questions on diversity reveal a mix of receptiveness and compunctions. Most parents say they value racial/ethnic and economic diversity in schools — but they're divided on its actual benefits, and interest wanes if it means a longer trip to school.

Seventy percent of parents say they'd prefer to have their child in a racially diverse school, including equal numbers of whites and nonwhites. But other results suggest that some of that may reflect a socially desirable answer rather than one on which individuals are fully convinced or willing to act.

Other key findings:

- A slight majority (55%) say having a mix of students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds in public schools is extremely or very important.
- Blacks (72%) are more likely than Hispanics (57%) and whites (48%) to call racial and ethnic diversity highly important. This view also is nearly twice as prevalent among Democrats as it is among Republicans, and, in statistical modeling, political party affiliation is the strongest predictor for this view.
- Similarly tepid majorities overall say that racially diverse schools produce a better learning environment for white students (51%) or black and Hispanic students (55%). Nearly all the rest say it makes no difference.
- If a racially diverse school is farther away, 57% say they'd prefer to send their child to a closer but less diverse school; 61% of whites say so, as do 52% of nonwhites. Just 25% overall say it's worth the trip.
- Responses on economic diversity are generally similar, though more muted. Fewer parents (61%) say they'd prefer to send their child to a school with a mix of students from different economic backgrounds; less than half (45%) see this as highly important. Comparatively few (20%) say they'd accept a longer commute to a more economically diverse school.

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Wrapping support around children who need it most

Wraparound services — such as mental health services and after-school programs — are receiving increasing attention as schools seek to ensure that students have the full range of supports they need to succeed.

Americans generally say that public schools should provide such services to students who don't have access to them somewhere else and that schools should be able to seek additional public funds to do so.

Other key findings:

- Among the services mentioned, those that respondents rate as most important for public schools to provide to students in need include after-school programs (92%) and mental health services (87%), and most by far feel that way strongly.
- Three-quarters of respondents say that schools are justified in seeking additional public funds to pay to provide such services.

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Measuring school quality

Standardized testing, which has driven much of the policy activity in

education over the past two decades, draws little support from the public: Just 42% of Americans call performance on standardized tests a highly important indicator of school quality — that includes just 13% who call test scores extremely important. Compare that to the 39% who say it's extremely important for schools to develop students' interpersonal skills and 37% who say offering technology and engineering instruction is extremely important.

Every other potential quality metric tested in this survey far surpasses testing as a measure of school quality: having extracurricular activities, art and music classes, advanced academic classes, technology and engineering classes, and efforts to develop students' interpersonal skills.

Other key findings:

- 58% of public school parents are confident that standardized tests do a good job measuring how well their child is learning, but a mere 19% are very confident of this.
- 49% of public school parents say standardized tests don't measure aspects of their child's education that are important to them personally.
- Although Americans are far more likely to see the development of interpersonal skills as an important indicator of school quality, just 39% are confident that standardized tests can measure these skills. That said, 84% say schools should assess students on their interpersonal skills, and 66% say schools should be held accountable for these test results as well as for academic skill results. Even if skills are imperfectly assessed, these results suggest, accountability still is in demand.

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Grading the public schools

As it has for nearly five decades, the 2017 PDK survey repeats its annual assessment of the public schools overall. While results are largely similar to last year's, one item stands out: The proportion of Americans who give their community's public schools an A grade is its highest in more than 40 years of PDK polling. Fifteen percent — one in seven Americans — give their local schools an A, up from 9% a decade ago. That figure has been surpassed just once, in 1974.

Other key findings:

- 49% of Americans give their local public schools an A or B grade, matching its average since 1999. The percentage is even higher — 62% — among public school parents.
- As in previous years, the public schools nationally are graded more severely — 24% of respondents give them an A or B grade. Local public schools are graded more negatively in the nation's most densely populated cities, with ratings rising as population density decreases. Similarly, big city dwellers are least trusting of their state's ability to evaluate their local schools.
- 22% of Americans cite a lack of funding as the biggest problem facing their local schools, similar to the past two years but down from the mid-30s during the aftermath of the economic downturn from 2009 to 2014.

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Expecting children to attend college

Most public school parents (61%) expect their child to attend college full time, while 22% expect a mix of part-time study and part-time work, and 7% expect their child to seek a full-time job after high school. These expectations match parents' own preferences.

That 61% figure looks quite reasonable: The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported last spring that about six in 10 2016 high school graduates were enrolled full time in colleges and universities in fall of that year.

But going to college doesn't necessarily mean attending a four-year college. Fewer than half of public school parents (47%) expect their child to enroll in a four-year college full time. An additional 14% expect their child to enroll in a two-year college or a vocational-technical school, or they're unsure what they'll do.

Further, only one-third of the 22% of public school parents who expect their child to work part time and study part time expect that their child will be enrolled in a four-year college. Another one-third say it'll be a two-year college, 14% say vocational-technical, and as many are unsure.

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State polls

Two companion state surveys reveal whether residents in Georgia and New York reflect – or differ from – prevailing national opinion about K-12 education.

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PDK Poll

About the PDK poll

Financed solely by the PDK Educational Foundation and published by *Kappan* magazine, the PDK Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public Schools is the most trusted source of public opinion about K-12 education.

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