

# FAQs

## Do Americans favor school choice policies?

Yes. Numerous polls and surveys find that most Americans support policies for school vouchers and tax-credit scholarships.

In 2010, the Foundation for Educational Choice conducted statistically representative surveys of registered voters in seven states. In all of the surveys, majorities favored school voucher and tax-credit scholarship policies.

- Voters supported vouchers in the interviews; favorability ranged from mid-50s to mid-70s, depending on the state surveyed. Mississippi and New Jersey recorded the highest support for vouchers, 74 percent and 69 percent respectively. Kansas and Arkansas showed the lowest levels of favorability, 56 percent and 60 percent respectively.
- Tax-credit scholarships also garnered substantial voter support. Favorability also averaged in the mid-60s. New York and New Jersey recorded the highest support for tax-credit scholarships, 70 percent and 69 percent respectively. Kansas and Alabama voiced the lowest levels of favorability, 56 percent and 60 percent respectively.

Many national polls have documented support for school vouchers, or the functional equivalent termed “scholarships”:

- 61 percent supported, and 27 percent opposed, school vouchers allowing parents to move their children from under-performing schools to more successful schools. (Sacred Heart University 2005)
- 62 percent agreed, two years in a row, that “parents should have the option of sending their children to non-public schools, including those with a religious affiliation, using vouchers or credits provided by the federal government that would pay for some or all of the costs.” (First Amendment Center 2003 & 2004)

- 63 percent supported “allowing poor parents to be given the tax dollars allotted for their child’s education and permitting them to use those dollars in the form of a scholarship to attend a private, public or parochial school of their choosing.” (Zogby 2002)
- 53 percent agreed, and 42 percent disagreed, that “the federal government should set aside public funds for students enrolled in public schools that are considered to be failing; the money will then be used to pay for the students to attend their choice of public, private, or parochial school.” (Zogby 2002)
- 51 percent favored, and 40 percent opposed, the idea of school vouchers to help send children to private or parochial schools. (Associated Press 2002)
- 69 percent supported vouchers even if public schools got less money: “What if that meant the public schools in your community would receive less money, then would you agree or disagree that parents should get tax-funded vouchers they can use to help pay for tuition for their children to attend private or religious schools instead of public schools?” (CBS/New York Times 2001)
- 54 percent said yes, and 38 percent said no, when asked: “Would vouchers improve the public school system?” (CNN/USA Today/Gallup 2001)

Five polls using various question wording all found support for vouchers in 2000:

- 64 percent agreed, and 34 percent disagreed, that “parents should have the option of sending their children to religious schools instead of public schools using ‘vouchers’ or ‘credits’ provided by the government that would pay for some or all costs.” (University of Connecticut)

- 56 percent preferred the position that “government should give parents more educational choices by providing taxpayer-funded vouchers to help pay for private or religious schools,” compared to 38 percent who preferred the position that “government funding should be limited to public schools.” (NBC/*Wall Street Journal*)
- 53 percent favored, and 44 percent opposed, “federal funding for vouchers to help low- and middle-income parents send their children to private and parochial schools.” (Pew/Princeton Associates)
- 50 percent favored, and 45 percent opposed, “establishing a school voucher program that would allow parents to use tax funds to send their children to a private school.” (University of Maryland)
- 49 percent favored, and 47 percent opposed, “providing parents with tax money in the form of school vouchers to help pay for their children to attend private or religious schools.” (Washington Post/Kaiser/Harvard University)

Unfortunately, not all polls and questions are created equal—some use poorly phrased and worded questions that produce biased findings. The annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll, contains a voucher question that has been proven to be extremely sensitive to small changes in wording. The methodological problems of the PDK/Gallup voucher question were originally documented by Terry Moe of Stanford University in the Spring 2002 and Fall 2002 issues of the academic journal *Education Next*.

In 2004 and 2005, the Friedman Foundation commissioned a poll that asked 500 people the PDK/Gallup question, and 500 people the same question with two small changes. The results shifted dramatically both times—by 22 and 23 points, respectively:

Since 2007, Harvard’s Program on Education Policy and Governance (PEPG) and the journal *Education Next* have been conducting annual surveys on K-12 education reforms. By asking multiple versions of

the same kind of reform (i.e. vouchers), Harvard researchers have been testing the effects of wording and phrasing on school choice questions. In the first year of their survey, 45 percent favored and 34 percent opposed, using “government funds to pay the tuition of low-income students who choose to attend private schools.” The wording of this particular question changed slightly in the subsequent surveys in 2008 and 2009—dampening support down to 35 percent in the most recent survey in 2009. Other wording that has introduced the term “competition” appears to have a positive boost for voucher questions, thus increasing support. The annual Education Next-PEPG project continues to be an insightful experiment in survey design. (*Education Next*/Harvard Program on Education Policy and Governance 2007-2009)

In some state polls, responses to voucher questions have also been affected by poor wording and phrasing. In Florida, one poll produced the appearance of 61 percent opposition to vouchers by inaccurately defining “vouchers” as “giving state funds to private schools.” (St. Petersburg Times 2006) Another poll taken in the same month, which didn’t define what vouchers are but simply asked whether people supported the governor’s proposed voucher legislation, found 48 percent supported it and 41 percent opposed it. (Tampa Tribune 2006)

In Utah, one poll found 54 percent opposed to vouchers “for parents who send their children to private schools,” a description that would lead many respondents to think that vouchers would only go to parents who currently send their children to private schools. (Deseret Morning News 2005) Another poll taken only three months later, by the same polling company, said that “some have proposed that the government provide a certain amount of money for each child’s education. The parents can then send the child to any public, parochial, or private school they choose. This is called the ‘voucher system’”; this poll found 56 percent favored vouchers and 24 percent opposed them. (Brigham Young University 2006)