

Date: June 19, 2012
To: All Interested Parties
From: Paul DiPerna
RE: Findings from the Montana K-12 & School Choice Survey

Overview

The “Montana K-12 & School Choice Survey” project, commissioned by the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice and conducted by Braun Research, Inc. (BRI), measures Montana registered voters’ familiarity and views on a range of K-12 education topics and school choice reforms. We report response *levels* and *differences* (often using the modifying term “net”) of voter opinion, and the *intensity* of responses.

Where do Montanans stand on important issues and policy proposals in K-12 education? We try to provide some observations and insights in this memo.

A randomly selected and statistically representative sample of Montana voters recently responded to 19 substantive questions and 11 demographic questions. A total of 604 telephone interviews were conducted in English from April 12 to 19, 2012, by means of both landline and cell phone. Statistical results were weighted to correct known demographic discrepancies. The margin of sampling error for the statewide sample is ± 4.0 percentage points.

In this project we included four split-sample experiments. A split-sample design is a systematic way of comparing the effects of two or more alternative wordings for a given question. The purpose is to see if particular wording, or providing a new piece of information, can significantly influence opinion on a given topic. For this survey, we were particularly interested in how wording can affect responses to questions on education spending, taxes, and digital learning—all salient issues in Montana state politics and policy discussions.

Key Findings:

- ▶ **More than three of four registered voters in Montana (77%) are paying attention to issues in K-12 education. Nearly one of four voters (23%) say they pay “very little” or no attention.**

See Question 1

In the poll, Montanans who say they pay “a lot” of attention (39%) to K-12 education issues outnumber those who say they pay no attention (5%) by nearly an eight-to-one ratio.

Middle-age and older voters (ages 30 to 49, and 50 and older, respectively) clearly pay closer attention to these issues than younger voters. About 4 of 10 voters 30 and older are engaged on K-12 education issues, saying they pay “a lot” of attention. By comparison, about one-fifth of younger voters (age 18 to 29) say the same.

- ▶ **Montanans are more likely to think that K-12 education is heading in the “right direction” (49%) compared to being on the “wrong track” (38%).**

See Question 2

A couple demographics pop out. Democrats (58%) are significantly more positive than Republicans (46%) about the direction of K-12 education in Montana. Middle-age voters (age 30 to 49) are significantly more likely to be negative than younger and older voters (voters saying “wrong track” 45% vs. 30% and 36%, respectively).

- ▶ **Montana voters give high marks to the state’s public school system (60% say “good” or “excellent”; 38% say “fair” or “poor”).**

See Question 3

Urban voters are more likely to express positive ratings (68%) and significantly less likely to give negative ratings (31%) when compared to rural voters. About half of

voters in rural areas (55%) said the public school system is “good” or “excellent.” And roughly 43% of these voters gave ratings of “fair” or “poor.”

Democrat responses are significantly different than both Republicans and Independents. About 7 of 10 Democrats (72%) gave positive ratings to the state’s public school system, which is much greater than the proportions of Independents (60%) and Republicans (55%) saying the same. Conversely, 28% of Democrats described the public school system as “fair” or “poor.” But about 4 of 10 Independents (37%) and Republicans (43%) offered negative ratings.

Age appears to matter on this question. Older voters (65%) are more positive than younger (54%) and significantly more so than middle-age voters (54%). Conversely, the latter age groups (46% and 42%, respectively) are significantly more negative than older voters (32%).

- ▶ **Based on survey responses, Montana voters do not know how much is spent per student in public schools. There is an awareness gap.**

See Question 4

Approximately \$10,189 is spent on each student in Montana’s public schools, and only 11% of respondents could estimate the correct per-student spending range for the state (this dollar figure reflects “current expenditures” per student). Nearly one-fifth of all respondents (20%) thought that less than \$4,000 is being spent per student in the state’s public schools. Another 44% of voters said they “don’t know” and did not offer a spending number.¹

¹ “Current Expenditures” data include dollars spent on instruction, instruction-related support services, and other elementary/secondary current expenditures, but exclude expenditures on long-term debt service, facilities and construction, and other programs. “Total Expenditures” includes the latter categories.

See Frank Johnson, Lei Zhou, and Nanae Nakamoto, *Revenues and Expenditures for Public Elementary and Secondary Education: School Year 2008–09 (Fiscal Year 2009)* (NCES 2011-329). U.S. Department of Education. Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics (June 2011).

URL: nces.ed.gov/pubs2011/2011329.pdf

When considering “total expenditures” per student (\$11,530 in 2008-2009), which is another definition for educational spending, voter estimates are still off-target.

Of the 337 respondents who offered an estimate or guess to this question, more than 8 of 10 voters (82%) either underestimated “total” educational spending per student, or they could not give an answer or guess. No matter how one defines expenditures (per student), voters are woefully uninformed about how money is spent in K-12 education.

- ▶ **When given the latest per-student spending information, voters are less likely to say public school funding is at a level that is “too low,” compared to answering without having such information.**

See Questions 5A and 5B

We asked two slightly different questions about the level of public school funding in Montana. On version 5A, 43% of voters said that public school funding is “too low.” However, on version 5B, which included a sentence referring to data on per-student funding in Montana (\$10,189), the proportion of voters saying “too low” shrank by six percentage points, effectively a 14% reduction.

Montanans are likely to change their views on public school funding – at least when initially saying it is “too low” – if given accurate per-student spending information. The implication that opinion can turn on a single piece of data is important for political sound bites that focus on aggregate levels of public spending rather than how the money is allocated and spent per student.

- ▶ **A plurality of voters (47%) would prefer state taxes to “stay about the same,” rather than increase or decrease taxes to fund public schools. A majority of voters (52%) say they prefer to keep local taxes about the same.**

See Questions 6A and 6B

Considering the statewide sample, approximately 67% of voters want taxes to stay the same or decrease at both the state and local levels. Solid majorities of voters across nearly all demographic groups either support keeping taxes about the same or decreasing them.

A respondent's political party identification does matter on this question. By far, Democrats are most likely to want tax increases at the state level (58%) and local level (45%), especially compared to Republican voters on state taxes (22% want an increase) and local taxes (15% want an increase). Generally speaking, Independent responses averaged between Republicans and Democrats.

- ▶ **When asked for a preferred school type, Montanans would choose first a regular public school (50%). A private school option is the second-most frequently cited preference (28%). Even when considering the relative popularity of public schools, there is still a glaring disconnect between voters' school preferences and actual enrollment patterns in the state.**

See Questions 7 and 8

Approximately 5% of Montana's K-12 student population attends private schools, but in our survey interviews, 28% of respondents would select a private school as a first option. Approximately 95% of the state's students attend regular public schools, but a substantially lower percentage of voters (50%) would choose a regular public school as their first choice. Montana does not have a charter school law, so no students attend public charter schools. That said, there is still a proportion of Montana voters (9%) that would like to send their child to a charter school. About 10% of voters said he/she would opt to homeschool their child.

In a follow-up question, roughly equal numbers of respondents in our survey prioritize a "better education" and "socialization" (13% each impression) as the key attribute they are looking for in the selection of their preferred school. The next most important attribute, as suggested by about 9% of all respondents, is "individual attention" and "one-on-one" learning.

Some caution. These characteristics appear to be a higher priority over others on the list. However, any of these qualities may or may not attract more urgency as a second or third priority, which we do not explore in our survey.

- ▶ **Montana voters are much more likely to favor charter schools (54%), rather than oppose such schools (21%). The net support for charter schools is very large (+33 net percentage points).**

See Questions 9 and 10

Montana registered a large positive net score (+33 net) supporting charter schools. The enthusiasm is also quite positive (+11 intensity). In other words, voters are more likely to say they “strongly favor” charter schools (21%) compared to those who say they “strongly oppose” (10%) such schools.

Charter schools enjoy majority support across nearly all examined demographic groups. However, where a voter lives can point to some differences in support levels. For example, suburban voters (62%) are significantly more favorable toward charter schools than voters living in small towns (49%).

Democrats differ from Republicans and Independents. Republicans (60%) and Independents (56%) are more supportive of charter schools than Democrats (46%). Republicans (14%) are also significantly less likely to oppose charters than Democrats (32%) and Independents (24%).

Intensity of support for charters is greatest among parents, urban and suburban voters, Republicans, younger and middle-age voters, and households earning \$75,000 or more. There is relatively weaker intensity (but still positive) among small-town voters, older voters (age 50 & Over), and households earning between \$50,000 and \$74,999. Democrats exhibit a mildly negative attitude (-3 intensity) toward charter schools.

- ▶ **Montanans are slightly less likely to be supportive of virtual or online schools. In a split-sample experiment, we asked identical questions but alternated the terms “virtual school” and “online school.”**

See Questions 11, 12A, 12B

When using “virtual school” in question 12A, a plurality opposes the concept (47% oppose; -6 net). On the other hand, when using the term “online school,” we observe a statistical tie (44% favor vs. 47% oppose; -3 net).

In this data, we provide some caution for virtual/online school advocates. On either question, those voters who hold strongly negative views on virtual/online schools double the proportion of supporters, as defined in this questionnaire (12A: 24% “strongly oppose” vs. 11% “strongly favor”; 12B: 29% “strongly oppose” vs. 15% “strongly favor”). The intensity on either split question is negative (-13 intensity for 12A; -14 intensity for 12B).

- ▶ **Voters solidly support “tax-credit scholarships.” The percentage of those who favor (59% or 60%, depending on the question version) is more than double the number of people who say they oppose the policy (28% and 26%, respectively). No matter the wording of the question, we measure very positive reactions (+31 net and +34 net).**

See Questions 13A, 13B, and 14

Based on our split-sample experiment results, it appears adding definition and context for voters does not affect the view of the average Montana voter.

In a follow-up and open-ended question, we asked for the reason why a respondent chose his/her view regarding tax-credit scholarships. Most frequently, he/she would say some combination of “choice,” “freedom,” or “flexibility,” and that the scholarship system was a “good idea.” Greater than 10% of voters stated either of these items.

- ▶ **Montana voters support an “education savings account” system (called an “ESA”). The percentage of those who favor ESAs (55%) is much larger than the proportion who say they oppose (31%) the policy. The net score is large (+24 net) with some enthusiasm (+7 intensity).**

See Question 15

Majorities support ESAs across nearly all examined demographics. Net support is highest among parents (+45 net), young voters (+51 net), middle-age voters (+37 net), and households earning less than \$75,000 (+30 net).

Enthusiasm for this kind of policy is highest among parents (+31 intensity), urban residents (+15 intensity), young and middle-age voters (+20 intensity), Republicans (+14 intensity), and households earning less than \$75,000 (+12 intensity).

- ▶ **Just over half of Montana voters (52%) said they support school vouchers, compared to 39% of voters who say they oppose such a school choice system. The margin of support is more than three times the margin of error: + 13 net percentage points.**

See Questions 16 and 17

The levels of support for vouchers vary a bit among demographic groups, but with the exception of a few groups, net favorability is in double digits.

Net support for school vouchers is highest among parents (+35 net), urban voters (+20 net), Republicans (+34 net), young voters (+38 net), middle-age voters (+19 net), and households earning less than \$50,000 (+18 net). Groups significantly less inclined to support vouchers are non-parents (+3 net), suburban voters (- 1 net), Democrats (- 28 net), and older voters (- 1 net).

Enthusiasm for this kind of policy is highest among parents (+22 intensity), urban voters (+15 intensity), Republicans (+18 intensity), young and middle-age voters (+15 intensity), and households earning less than \$25,000 (+13 intensity).

Some demographic differences appear based on parent status, age, and political party identification. Parents (63%) are significantly more likely to favor school vouchers, compared to Non-Parents (47%). The latter group (44%) is also much more likely to be opposed, compared to Parents (28%). Young (64%) and middle-age (56%) voters are significantly more supportive of vouchers compared to older voters (45%). Conversely, older voters (46%) are significantly more likely to oppose school vouchers compared to young voters (26%) and middle-age voters (37%). Republicans (62%) and Independents (54%) are much more likely to support vouchers compared to Democrats (33%)

When comparing school choice policy ideas, the enthusiasm for school vouchers (+4 intensity) is roughly the same as detected for ESAs (+7 intensity), and less than charter schools (+11 intensity). Of the reforms we asked about, there appears to be the most intensity for tax-credit scholarships (+15 intensity, when averaging the two question versions).

In a follow-up and open-ended question, we asked for the reason why a respondent chose his/her view regarding school vouchers. Most frequently, he/she would say “choice,” “freedom,” or “flexibility.” Approximately 23% of voters offered one of these similar terms.

► **Montanans overwhelmingly prefer universal access to vouchers and scholarships, compared to access based solely on financial need.**

See Questions 18 and 19

Six of 10 voters (63%) say they agree with the statement that “school vouchers or scholarships should be available to all families, regardless of incomes and special needs.” Four of 10 respondents (40%) “strongly agree” with this statement. Almost one of three (31%) disagree with this statement; 20% say they “strongly disagree.”

Four of 10 Montanans (40%) say they agree with the statement that “school vouchers or scholarships should only be available to families based on financial need.” Only

19% of all respondents “strongly agree” with this statement. More than half (53%) say they disagree with means-testing vouchers, and 32% say they “strongly disagree.”

Survey Project & Profile

Title:	Montana K-12 & School Choice Survey
Survey Organization:	Braun Research Incorporated (BRI)
Survey Sponsor:	The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice
Release Partners:	Montana Family Foundation, Montana Policy Institute
Interview Dates:	April 12 to 19, 2012
Interview Method:	Live Telephone 80% landline and 20% cell phone
Interview Length:	12 minutes (average)
Language(s):	English
Sample Frame:	Registered Voters
Sampling Method:	Dual Frame; Probability Sampling; Random Digit Dial (RDD)
Sample Size:	MONTANA = 604
Split Sample Sizes:	“Split A” = 302; “Split B” = 302
Margins of Error:	MONTANA = ± 4.0 percentage points Each Split Sample = ± 5.6 percentage points
Response Rates:	Landline (LL) = 17.2% Cell Phone = 17.5%
Weighting?	Yes (Age, Gender, Race, and Ethnicity)
Oversampling?	No

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