

Date: June 5, 2012
To: All Interested Parties
From: Paul DiPerna
RE: Findings from the Tennessee K-12 & School Choice Survey

Overview

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

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

A randomly selected and statistically representative sample of Tennessee voters recently responded to 17 substantive questions and 11 demographic questions (see pages 49 – 76). The next section summarizes our key findings.

A total of 606 telephone interviews were conducted in English from February 11 to 21, 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 five 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 taxes, education spending, and digital learning—all salient issues in Tennessee state politics and policy discussions.

Our polling paper has four sections. The first section summarizes key findings. We call the second section “Survey Snapshots,” which offers charts highlighting the core findings of the project. The third section describes the survey’s methodology, summarizes response statistics, and presents additional technical information on call dispositions for landline and cell phone interviews. The fourth section presents our questionnaire and results (“topline numbers”), essentially allowing the reader to follow the actual interview as it was conducted, with respect to question wording and ordering. We set out to give a straight-forward analysis, going easy on editorial commentary, and letting the numbers and charts communicate the major findings.

Key Findings:

- ▶ **Nearly three of four registered voters in Tennessee (74%) are paying attention to issues in K-12 education. About one of four voter (25%) say they pay “very little” or no attention.**

See Question 1

In the poll, Tennesseans who say they pay “a lot” of attention (44%) to K-12 education issues outnumber those who say they pay no attention (9%) by a nearly five-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. Almost half of the 30 and older voters (47%) are engaged on K-12 education issues, saying they pay “a lot” of attention. By comparison, about one-quarter of younger voters (age 18 to 29) say the same.

- ▶ **Tennesseans are less likely to think that K-12 education is heading in the “right direction” (36%) compared to being on the “wrong track” (50%).**

See Question 2

Small town and rural voters (43% and 37%, respectively, say “right direction”) are more positive on this question than suburban voters (27%). Nearly 6 of 10 suburban respondents (57%) said the state’s K-12 education system is on the “wrong track.”

Age appears to correspond with educational outlook. Younger voters in the age groups 18 to 29 and 30 to 49 tend to be more optimistic (44% and 39%, respectively, say “right direction”) than older voters (31% say “right direction”).

- ▶ **Tennessee voters are essentially split when assessing the state’s public school system (47% say “good” or “excellent”; 49% say “fair” or “poor”).**

See Question 3

Urban voters are much more likely to give negative ratings (62%) and less likely to give positive ratings (35%) when compared to small town and rural voters. About half of voters in small towns and rural areas said the public school system is “good” or “excellent.” And roughly 44% of these voters gave ratings of “fair” or “poor.”

Republican responses are significantly different than Independent responses. About half of self-identified Republicans (53%) gave positive ratings, which is greater than the proportion of Independents (41%) saying the same. Conversely, 44% of Republicans described the public school system as “fair” or “poor.” Nearly 6 of 10 Independents (56%) gave these negative ratings.

More than half of respondents (52%) from households earning less than \$50,000 offered positive ratings for the state’s public schools. Nearly 6 of 10 low-income respondents (58%) said “good” or “excellent.” On the other hand, households earning \$50,000 or more were less positive (44%).

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

See Question 4

Approximately \$7,992 is spent on each student in Tennessee’s public schools, and 25% of respondents could estimate the correct per-student spending range for the state (this dollar figure reflects “current expenditures” per student). Nearly one-third of all respondents (31%) thought that less than \$4,000 is being spent per student in the state’s public schools. Another 28% of voters said “don’t know” to the question and did not offer a spending number.¹

When considering “total expenditures” per student (\$8,894 in 2008-2009), which is another definition for educational spending, voter estimates look much more off-target. Only 9% of voters estimated the “\$8,001 to \$12,000” spending range. Of the 437 respondents who offered an estimate or guess to this question, almost eight of ten (78%) underestimated “total” educational spending per student.

Tennessee’s spending estimates are slightly better when compared to other states where we have polled. But 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

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

We asked two slightly different questions about the level of public school funding in Tennessee. On version 5A, 55% 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 Tennessee (\$7,992), the proportion of voters saying “too low” shrank by 14 percentage points, effectively a 25% reduction.

Tennesseans 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.

- ▶ **Pluralities of voters (about 4 of 10) would prefer taxes to “stay about the same,” rather than increase or decrease taxes to fund public schools. In a split-sample experiment, no statistically significant differences emerged among respondents favoring state taxes versus local taxes.**

See Questions 6A and 6B

Considering the statewide sample, approximately 56% 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 age does matter on this question. Middle-age voters are more likely to want tax increases at the state level (42%) and local level (42%), especially compared to younger voters on state taxes (21% want an increase) and older voters on local taxes (29% want an increase). Nearly 6 of 10 younger voters (58%) said they support an increase in local taxes.

- ▶ **When asked for a preferred school type, equal proportions of Tennessee voters (40% each) would either first choose a regular public school or**

private school. Evidence points to a vast disconnect between voters' school preferences and actual enrollment patterns in the state.

See Question 7

A little more than 7% of Tennessee's K-12 student population attends private schools, but in our survey interviews, 4 of 10 voters (40%) would select a private school as a first option. Approximately 92% of the state's students attend regular public schools, but a much lower percentage of voters (40%) would choose a regular public school as their first choice. Roughly 4,600 students in the state attend charter schools (less than 1% of the state's K-12 student population), but 9% of Tennessee voters would like to send their child to a charter school. About 8% of voters said he/she would opt to homeschool their child. The results suggest the capability to choose a preferred school is very limited in Tennessee.

Our callers interviewed more than 200 parents of school-age children. Only 3 of 10 parents (31%) said they would first choose a regular public school. About 44% of non-parents said they preferred a regular public school.

Nearly half of Democrats (47%) chose a regular public school, and 4 of 10 Independents (42%) indicated the same. Other demographic groups that stood out favoring regular public schools included younger voters (52%) and voters earning less than \$50,000 (46%).

Democrats were also more likely than Republicans and Independents to say they would choose a charter school. Middle-age and older voters were more likely than younger voters to prefer a charter school.

Republicans and Independents were more likely to want to homeschool than Democrats. Whites were much more likely to choose the homeschool option when compared with African Americans.

Nearly half of Republicans (49%) said they would first select a private school, a significantly different average response compared to Democrats (34%) and

Independents (37%). Nearly half of respondents (47%) living in middle-income and high-income households chose a private school as first option. A significantly lower level of respondents (33%) in lower-income households (< \$50,000) selected a private school.

- ▶ **Roughly equal numbers of respondents in our survey prioritize a “better education” and “individual attention” (12% 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 10% of all respondents, is “socialization” among other peer students and kids.**

See Question 8

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.

- ▶ **Tennessee voters are much more likely to favor charter schools (61%), rather than oppose such schools (18%). The net support for charter schools is very large (+43 net percentage points).**

See Questions 9 and 10

Tennessee registered a very large positive net score (+43 net) supporting charter schools. The enthusiasm is also quite positive (+14 intensity). In other words, voters are more likely to say they “strongly favor” charter schools (22%) compared to those who say they “strongly oppose” (8%).

Charter schools enjoy majority support across all examined demographic groups.

However, where a voter lives can point to some differences in support level. For example, urban voters (73%) are much more favorable toward charter schools than voters living in small towns (58%) and rural areas (59%).

Democrats and Republicans differ as well. Republicans (67%) are more supportive of charter schools than Democrats (58%), and Republicans (15%) are less likely to oppose charters than Democrats (23%).

Intensity of support for charters is greatest among parents, urban voters, Republicans, and households earning \$75,000 or more. There is relatively weaker intensity (but still positive) among younger voters (age 18 to 29) and low-income households earning less than \$25,000.

About one of three voters (33%) say they are at least “somewhat familiar” with charter schools, which is similar awareness compared to what we have seen in other states.

There may be opportunity to grow support for charter schools. Although only one-third of voters say they are familiar with charters, the potential voter support for a “charter school” probably could expand if the policy idea is better understood. The association between charter school familiarity and favorability is positive in direction and moderate in size ($r=.270, p < .01$).

- ▶ **Depending on terminology, voters appear to marginally shift their views on virtual/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 majority opposes the concept (55% oppose; -22 net). On the other hand, when using the term “online school,” a similar plurality supports the concept (51% oppose; -14 net).

In this data, we provide some caution for virtual/online school advocates. On either question nearly 3 of 10 voters hold strongly negative views on virtual/online schools, as defined in this questionnaire (12A: 29% “strongly oppose”; 12B: 27% “strongly oppose”). The intensity on either split question is currently negative (-18 intensity for 12A; -13 intensity for 12B).

However, there may be opportunity to grow support for “virtual schools.” Approximately 30% of voters say they are familiar with “virtual schools.” The association between virtual school familiarity and favorability is positive in direction and moderate in size ($r=.370, p < .01$).

Likewise, the same can be suggested for educating and building support for “online schools.” The same proportion of voters say they are familiar with online schools. The association between online school familiarity and favorability is positive in direction and moderate in size ($r=.283, p < .01$).

- ▶ **Tennesseans clearly support “tax-credit scholarships.” The percentage of those who favor (61% or 69%, depending on the question version) is more than double the number of people who say they oppose the policy (26% and 20%). No matter the wording of the question, we measure very positive reactions (+35 net and +49 net).**

See Questions 13A and 13B

Based on our split-sample experiment results, it appears adding definition and context for voters will likely boost support for tax-credit scholarships (by eight percentage points, from 61% to 69%). The additional wording in question 13B also affects some demographic groups, such as Republicans (67% to 80% favor) and middle-age voters (58% to 82% favor). No matter the extra wording, older voters are more negative than other demographic groups – nearly three of ten say they are opposed to tax-credit scholarships.

There is majority support across all examined demographic groups. That said, a stark difference emerges among generations of voters. Almost three-fourths of younger and middle-age voters (73%) support tax-credit scholarships, compared with a substantially lower proportion of older voters (55%).

- ▶ **Tennessee voters support an “education savings account” system (called an “ESA”). The percentage of those who favor ESAs (56%) is**

much larger than the proportion who say they oppose (31%) the policy. The net score is large (+25 net) with some enthusiasm (+12 intensity).

See Question 14

Majorities support ESAs across nearly all examined demographics. Net support is highest among parents (+35 net), young voters (+42 net), middle-age voters (+36 net), low-income voters (+35 net), and African Americans (+43 net). Older voters are least inclined to support ESAs (+8 net). Enthusiasm for this kind of policy is highest among parents (+24 intensity), young voters (+25 intensity), low-income voters (+24 intensity), and African Americans (+25 intensity).

Once again, age does matter on this policy question. Young and middle-age voters show strong support for ESAs (66% and 62%, respectively), but older voters are significantly less favorable (47%). Conversely, older voters (39%) are more apt to oppose ESAs than young and middle-age voters (24% and 5%, respectively).

- ▶ **Six of 10 Tennessee voters (59%) support school vouchers, compared to 31% of voters who say they oppose such a school choice system. The margin of support is considerable – 28 percentage points.**

See Questions 15, 16, and 17

Majorities of support appear for all examined demographic groups. The levels of support for vouchers vary a bit among groups, but with the exception of older voters, net favorability is in the double digits.

Net support for school vouchers is highest among parents (+46 net), urban voters (+45 net), Republicans (+36 net), young voters (+40 net), middle-age voters (+36 net), low-income voters (+46 net), and African Americans (+58 net). Those groups significantly less inclined to support vouchers are non-parents (+19 net), rural voters (+17 net), Independents (+20 net), and older voters (+18 net).

Enthusiasm for this kind of policy is highest among parents (+27 intensity), urban voters (+23 intensity), Republicans (+24 intensity), young and middle-age voters (+19 intensity), low-income voters (+30 intensity), and African Americans (+30 intensity).

Some demographic differences appear based on community type and age. Urban (69%) and small town (61%) voters are more likely to support school vouchers than rural voters (52%). A similar contrast in support levels exists between young (68%) and middle-age (62%) voters compared to older voters (54%). Conversely, older voters (36%) are significantly more likely to oppose school vouchers compared to young and middle-age voters (27%).

When comparing school choice policy ideas, the enthusiasm for school vouchers (+11 intensity) is roughly the same as detected for charter schools (+14 intensity) and ESAs (+12 intensity), and less than tax-credit scholarships (+20 intensity).

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.

Nearly 4 of 10 voters (38%) say they are at least “somewhat familiar” with school vouchers, about average awareness compared to what we have seen in other states.

There is potential to broaden awareness and marginally expand support for school vouchers. The association between school voucher familiarity and favorability is positive in direction, but modest in size ($r=.186, p < .01$).

Survey Project & Profile

Title:	Tennessee K-12 & School Choice Survey
Survey Organization:	Braun Research Incorporated (BRI)
Survey Sponsor:	The Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice
Release Partner:	Beacon Center of Tennessee
Interview Dates:	February 11 to 21, 2012
Interview Method:	Live Telephone 70% landline and 30% 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:	TENNESSEE = 606
Split Sample Sizes:	“Split A” = 303; “Split B” = 303
Margins of Error:	TENNESSEE = ± 4.0 percentage points Each Split Sample = ± 5.6 percentage points
Response Rates:	Landline (LL) = 17.5% Cell Phone = 19.6%
Weighting?	Yes (Age, Gender, Race, and Hispanic origin)
Oversampling?	No

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