Assessing America

What do parents think about Common Core, standardized tests, and school choice?

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In the States
Kansas takes its first step with school choice while Florida enacts the nation’s second ESA program

Two-Minute Talk
Friedman’s Research Director, Paul DiPerna, breaks down school choice’s future supporters using national survey data
Broadcasting the new surveys on school choice

School choice is no game. Though this year the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice has relied frequently on a catchphrase from a popular TV game show: “Survey says!”

The Friedman Foundation has long had an interest in voters’ reactions to school choice. After all, it is they who make our Republic work and affect policymakers’ positions and actions. Thus, historically we have surveyed states primed for moving school choice as well as the general public who influence the national discussion on education.

This year our Oklahoma and Missouri surveys garnered significant press coverage in both states, as did the national poll (detailed in this edition’s cover story) we released at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C., which welcomed prominent National Review and Bloomberg columnist Ramesh Ponnuru as a discussant.

That success has prompted Team Friedman to expand our surveys even further. For example, we are surveying private schools to vet their interest and ability in joining school choice programs; that information is invaluable to private school leaders, media, and policymakers, which is why the Friedman Foundation is leading the effort. Indeed, our Tennessee survey on private schools made the governor’s report on vouchers while our Indiana private school evaluation donned the pages of the Indy Star.

As an investor in the Friedman Foundation, you obviously make that work possible. But you also have a vision for our foundation and how we can be successful. That is why, this year, we sent donors our first-ever “Supporter Survey,” which will help shape our plans in the years to come.

Most encouraging in that “Supporter Survey” was the resounding endorsement of our mission. The Friedman Foundation is known for many things: our quality research, thoughtful advocacy, and, of course, our affiliation with Milton and Rose D. Friedman. But it was our mission advancing the Friedmans’ vision of school choice for all children that our supporters most appreciated.

And they are not alone. A national survey conducted by Harvard University’s Institute of Politics compiled young Americans’ (ages 18-29) reactions to a number of cultural and political issues, including school choice. Among the 37 percent Democrat, 25 percent Republican, and 38 percent Independent respondents, the plurality (40 percent) said America would be better off if “parents had more freedom to choose” in education. Less than a quarter disagreed with school choice.

The “survey says” school choice is growing in reach and popularity. That’s a finding worthy of syndication.
Using school choice in Florida to reach the American Dream

Maria and Dayanna Garcia were born a minute apart and have been nearly inseparable ever since. With their parents’ hopes of a better life, the delightful twin girls’ story starts with a hopeful, but risky journey inside their mother’s womb from Cuba in a makeshift boat destined for the United States.

The twins were nearly lost before they could take their first breaths, however, when the boat their family traveled in got stranded on a Bahamian island before it ever reached Florida’s shores. But the Garcias made it, and survived yet another tragedy along the way when a hurricane ripped through their mobile home in 2005.

Like many Cuban-American families who have risked so much for freedom, the desire to realize the American Dream helped the Garcias keep their resolve, and now the girls have graduated from Champagnat Catholic School in Hialeah, Florida, which they were able to attend since third grade. When the Garcias needed help because of financial strains as the girls were preparing to start high school, they received the Step Up For Students Scholarship, the state’s tax-credit scholarship program, which carried them through to graduation in the spring of 2014.

Maria and Dayanna are convinced if they stayed in their neighborhood school they would have dropped out. Maria had a hard time concentrating, and Dayanna had trouble fitting in. Now, both plan on attending colleges separately—a big change for the young ladies. Maria is considering a career in business or science, and Dayanna hopes to attend a culinary arts school and perhaps open her own bakery. Thus, Maria and Dayanna are just like their parents: choosing to reach their American Dream.

Research earns the Foundation global news coverage

Indiana – Jeff Spalding, Friedman’s Director of Fiscal Policy and Analysis, appeared in stories by the Associated Press and Indy Star questioning the Indiana Department of Education’s fiscal report on the state’s voucher program.

Iowa – Jeff Reed, communications director for Friedman, was the keynote speaker at the Iowa Alliance for Choice in Education’s annual gathering of scholarship granting organizations.

Missouri – The Foundation’s “Missouri K-12 and School Choice Survey” was cited in a St. Louis Post-Dispatch story on state policymakers’ efforts to increase educational options. President and CEO Robert Enlow co-authored an op-ed with the Show-Me Institute’s James Shuls in the Columbia Daily Tribune.

National – “Sector Switchers,” the Foundation’s national report on why some Catholic schools closed and essentially reopened as charter schools, made the pages of Education Week, a national newspaper covering K-12 education, and earned evening coverage from EWN, the Global Catholic Television Network.


Foundation – Friedman welcomed Doran Moreland (pictured below) to its state team in July. Previously Doran served in the offices of United States Sen. Evan Bayh and Indianapolis Mayor Bart Peterson. Doran also worked at Rocketship Education, a public charter school working to eliminate the achievement gap.

Twins Maria, left, and Dayanna, right, attended a Step Up For Students event sponsored by scholarship program partner Waste Management at Miami’s Marlins Park.

Doran Moreland joined Team Friedman as a State Programs and Government Relations Director. Send him a welcome note at doran@edchoice.org.
It’s an uncertain time to be a parent in today’s K-12 education system.

First there’s the issue of the Common Core State Standards. To keep or not to keep is the question many state leaders are asking about the contentious reform.

On states’ standardized tests—many of which are tied to the Common Core—frustration is mounting among educators over the emphasis placed on such assessments.

And then there’s school choice, which would give parents the ability to opt out of both, if that’s what they want for their children—even though some policymakers are trying to impose state testing and the accompanied Common Core on private schools of choice.

As policymakers—including potential new ones after the November elections—wrestle with these issues affecting families, it is worth asking: What do the parents think?

The Friedman Foundation decided to find out.

Generally speaking, how would you rate the federal government’s handling of matters in K-12 education?

SCHOOL PARENTS:

74% Fair/Poor

22% Good/Excellent

Do you believe the amount of time spent on standardized testing in American schools is too high, about right, or too low?

SCHOOL PARENTS:

Too High

44%

About Right

30%

Too Low

22%
The objective of the Common Core State Standards Initiative is to establish similar academic standards and comparable tests across all states for students in grades K-12. The standards were initially developed by the National Governors Association and Council of Chief State School Officers. States and districts have adopted the common standards and tests in association with U.S. Department of Education incentives. In general, do you favor or oppose the Common Core?

If it were your decision and you could select any type of school, what type of school would you select in order to obtain the best education for your child?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Type</th>
<th>Favor</th>
<th>Oppose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charter School</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home School</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private School</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public School</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>63%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A school voucher system allows parents the option of sending their child to the school of their choice, whether that school is public or private, including both religious and non-religious schools. If this policy were adopted, tax dollars currently allocated to a school district would be allocated to parents in the form of a school voucher to pay partial or full tuition for their child’s school. In general, do you favor or oppose a school voucher system?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Voucher System</th>
<th>Favor</th>
<th>Oppose</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School Voucher</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Savings Account (ESA)</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An education savings account—often called an ESA—allows parents to take their child out of a public district or charter school, and receive a payment into a government-authorized savings account with restricted but multiple uses. Parents can then use these funds to pay for private school tuition, virtual education programs, private tutoring or saving for future college expenses. In general, do you favor or oppose this kind of savings account system?

To read the full “2014 Schooling in America Survey: Perspectives on School Choice, Common Core, and Standardized Testing,” visit edchoice.org/2014SchoolingSurvey
Sharing state experiences leads to shared success for school choice

For Kansas and Florida, 2011 was an instrumental year in advocates’ quests to provide more families the freedom to choose in education.

In September 2011, the Kansas Policy Institute (KPI) hosted a summit asking why its state was unwilling to consider school choice. First on the agenda: “The Florida Experience,” which included an overview of tax-credit scholarships.

That same year, Arizona launched the nation’s first education savings account (ESA) program. Florida took notice, as evidenced by Gov. Rick Scott’s public support of the plan, which subsequently cleared a Senate education committee.

Three years later, in 2014, Kansas launched its first school choice program with tax-credit scholarships, and Florida enacted the country’s second ESA program. Both are representative of the work and time it takes to achieve success in this field.

“Our goal was to educate, pure and simple,” James Franko, KPI’s Vice President and Policy Director, said. “Kansans heard little more than ‘nothing to see here’ from the education industry. We simply needed to show the people behind the numbers.”

KPI and Franko did exactly that, hosting educational forums across Kansas, even inviting school choice’s opponents to participate.

“We have a great story to tell,” Franko said. “We knew the numbers were on our side.”

Indeed, KPI produced reports providing the historical spending and academic achievement trends in Kansas public schools. KPI also leveraged voter survey data from a multi-state poll, which included Kansas, conducted by the Friedman Foundation. And Franko and his team told the Florida story—a lot.

“Florida’s experience with school choice is proof this work is worth it,” Franko said. “And, again, the data back that up. We just had to communicate it.”

As did advocates in Florida, who were conducting similar activities to create that state’s third school choice program.

Although Gov. Scott supported the ESA concept, it still faced high legislative hurdles. Accordingly, the proposal sat dormant in the legislature for two years—though ultimately that inactivity proved beneficial to ESAs’ backers, who used that time to build greater public support for the concept.

“Our first step was to meet with key stakeholders to get their ideas on ESAs,” Patricia Levesque, Florida resident and chief executive officer of the Foundation for Excellence in Education, said.

Given ESAs’ nontraditional structure, Levesque and other supporters extended their outreach beyond the traditional school choice community. One prominent group they engaged was homeschool parents, who typically cannot utilize voucher or tax-credit scholarship programs. Their support was critical to ESAs’ passage.

“The homeschooling parents we met had such compelling stories on what they were doing to educate their children,” Levesque said. “One particular mother stepped forward to express how ESAs would assist her in educating her child with disabilities at home. Those stories ultimately affected votes.”

As did incoming data showing the success of Arizona’s ESAs for students with special needs. Those facts and families gave Florida’s ESA supporters the inspiration to tailor their proposal to children with special needs and engage legislative leaders interested in improving special education.

For Levesque, the legislative lull thus had a silver lining in that it prompted ESA advocates to conduct more outreach to new groups—something KPI and Franko also excelled at in Kansas—and incoming Florida Senate President Andy Gardiner, who has a son with special needs, was dedicated to leading on the issue, which he did.

“School choice advocates need to identify who is not empowered in education and engage them,” Levesque said. “School choice work is never done until every parent has the ability to make decisions as to when, where, and how their child is educated. When the timing is right, all that work suddenly becomes meaningful in making school choice a reality.”
How has the public’s reaction to school choice changed over the years? In the “Schooling in America Survey” the trend is positive, though our poll is a young series. Still, support for vouchers is up more than seven percentage points since 2012. The annual changes we’ve observed regarding charter schools and tax-credit scholarships, meanwhile, are essentially flat. On education savings accounts (ESAs), we saw a drop of eight percentage points. However, familiarity with ESAs is lower than other choice policies, so I expect some volatility on this ESA question will exist for a few more years.

Should school choice supporters be encouraged by your surveys? What may be most encouraging are the levels of support among groups who will become more influential in leadership positions across sectors and industries, and, in particular, have increasingly greater impact with state and local public policies: parents of school-age children, young and middle-age Americans (ages 18-34 and 35-54 respectively), Latinos, African Americans, and political independents. Public support for choice-based policies spans a diverse range of demographic groups. The levels of support may vary group to group, but the basic message is pretty clear: Americans support more choice in K-12 education.

Do survey responses mirror today’s educational landscape? We often observe a substantial disconnect between public opinion and what is happening in the real world. The most glaring one being survey respondents’ schooling preferences (district, charter, private) compared with existing enrollment patterns. Another example is the mismatch between what Democrats say in our surveys compared with the rhetoric and actions of many Democratic politicians, particularly at the national level. On school choice, many politicians are lagging far behind public opinion. But they do eventually catch up to their constituents.

Paul DiPerna is the author of the “2014 Schooling in America Survey.” To request Paul as a speaker for one of your events, visit edchoice.org/SpeakersBureau.

Surveying the supply side of states’ private schools

Supply and demand—both are critical elements in a market system. However, those trying to bring such freedom to education too often focus solely on the latter. That is important, of course, but so is meeting that demand.

That is why the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice initiated a new series of surveys focused on the supply side of school choice—specifically, private schools’ ability and interest when it comes to participating in voucher, tax-credit scholarship, and education savings account (ESA) programs.

The survey process is straightforward—and effective. Using public data, the Friedman Foundation’s research department compiles a list of private schools in a given state and attempts to contact each to assess the following:

- Do schools have room for new students?
- Would schools join a school choice program?
- What regulations concern schools the most?
- How much do schools charge in tuition?
- What proportion of the schools’ populations already receive private financial assistance?
- Do private schools give an annual standardized test to their students?

Answers to those questions are critically important to policymakers and advocates as they craft school choice programs.

For example, if the median tuition across schools is $5,000, then a voucher, tax-credit scholarship, or ESA worth that amount likely would give parents ample “purchasing power.” Similarly, if private schools already are giving students nationally norm-referenced tests, then policymakers should resist the temptation to impose a costly state-created assessment on private educators, which may deter schools from participating.

Already the Friedman Foundation has conducted these surveys in a handful of states, one of which was included in the Tennessee governor’s official report on school vouchers. As school choice programs grow in size and number—and thus demand—the Friedman Foundation will respond by increasing the supply of these highly valuable surveys on private schools.

To see whether or how your state’s private schools might participate in such a survey, contact Drew Catt, research analyst with the Friedman Foundation, at dcatt@edchoice.org.

Paul DiPerna is the Research Director for the Friedman Foundation for Educational Choice.
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